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A New Approach to making Intelligent Interventions

Purpose of report

Set out in this report is a proposed refined approach to communications at the LGA for consideration by the Leadership Board. This approach will provide a stronger, sharper, and more co-ordinated focus to LGA communications generally,

Summary

This paper is the second on this subject, after an initial paper was discussed by a group called together by John Ransford, Chief Executive, on 4 October. A copy of the first paper is attached as **Appendix 1** to this report.

Recommendation

That the LGA Leadership considers the proposed refined approach to LGA communications set out in this report.

Action

Officers to action as appropriate.

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A New Approach to making Intelligent Interventions

Context

1. This paper is the second on this subject, after an initial paper dated 4 October 2011 was discussed by a group called together by John Ransford, Chief Executive. In commissioning this second paper, the group agreed that:
 - 1.1 the current LGA process for approving media comment is flawed and, although it works at one level in the majority of cases (particularly for example in the trade press), nonetheless it is still prone to unravel as an effective process when particularly newsworthy or contentious subjects arise;
 - 1.2 this is an issue which goes beyond the LGA and its good relations with the LGC and MJ. This is about longer term reputation over a period, and that will be driven by how the LGA handles more critical, more prominent coverage (such as in national newspapers and major broadcast channels), in a way which is consistently focused, professional, authoritative and based on high quality thinking and high quality execution;
 - 1.3 in line with what the LGA Chairman has said, the LGA should move away from reacting to 'every press enquiry' with a kind of 'cautious welcome' and be more incisive about what we say and when we say it – this may even mean 'getting it wrong' occasionally, as a recognised price to pay for intervening in more contentious issues if we think that is the right thing to do;
 - 1.4 the LGA should also have its policies, argument, strategy and lines on the major issues worked out in advance, with buy in from across the organisation through the recognised business planning process, so it is better able to anticipate and be prepared to comment when the opportunity arises;
 - 1.5 and it should give more freedom to agreed individuals so that they can respond more quickly and valuably to news and debate of importance to the sector.

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Comments on the previous paper

2. The 4 October paper proposed a new approach, based on two key principles:
 - 2.1 the development of an LGA 'Expert Panel' whereby policy leads on the key issues affecting local government are promoted as authoritative, independent, experts, especially to the media;
 - 2.2 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.
3. This approach provoked a number of critical comments, in summary:
 - 3.1 the 'expert panel' idea is flawed because the unique 'political mandate' of the LGA is a selling point and therefore should not be relegated to second place behind unelected officers, who would also 'upstage' elected councillors/members and so be unpopular or lack support;
 - 3.2 this might also mean the Chairman having no effective voice, because he is not the leader of a political group under the current structure and if groups are given more freedom to comment politically and cannot reach a consensus, he is then unable to comment as a Chairman who can only articulate an agreed view.
4. However, the approach also garnered support, in summary:
 - 4.1 it was accepted that the 'cautious welcome' approach has long been untenable, the LGA has wrestled with a kind of lack of corporate confidence for some time now, and these are among the factors that have in the past done more to undermine the LGA's voice of authority than strengthen it, with the consequent impact on overall organizational reputation – therefore the status quo had to change;
 - 4.2 it was accepted that there is a huge amount of expertise within LG House which does not always see the light of day. Some of this of course is deliberate, behind-the-scenes lobbying. But even where some issues and ideas deserve more prominence, and have sought more coverage, this is not always happening because they are unable to be successfully promoted, or are too contentious, ending up 'diluted' by cross-party consensus. Similarly, and reflecting the point about long term reputation, the LGA is not always the first place the media turn to for expertise on local government;

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- 4.3 it was also accepted, perhaps most importantly, that not only did the LGA have the ability, enthusiasm and energy to campaign on certain issues for the benefit of the whole sector, but that this was also possible within a broad policy framework which allows unelected officers more leeway while still enabling elected members to also play a role.

Suggested way forward

5. With some refinement, there is still a way to avoid a return to the status quo and, if the group agrees following further discussion, it seems the key elements of this are:
- 5.1 a policy framework which sets a clear direction on the key issues facing local government and allows more freedom of comment – particularly by elected members – within that framework, the framework itself being led and shaped by the overall LGA vision and mission;
- 5.2 this framework also helps to set the context for and determine a number of high profile ‘apolitical’ campaign issues, which can be aggressively promoted by unelected officers (chiefly board leads), by elected members (ie board chairs) – and by the Chairman, too;
- 5.3 on ‘non-campaign’ issues, LGA political groups should have 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, as in the normal local authority model. The Chairman would not play a role here therefore.
6. In order for this to work
- 6.1 the policy framework would need to be clearly established and rigorously adhered to, so that the freedoms set out within it were clearly understood and not abused – this could imply a single point of overview across board and political group communications activity, with reporting structures reflecting this;
- 6.2 on issues where different political groups put out different statements, again this would need to be managed, with a clear set of protocols and strong overview, so that one group did not seek to sabotage or undermine another;
- 6.3 the agreed campaigns would need to be bought into by the whole LGA and all of its efforts and resources put into them in a unified, focused way,

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undistracted by political differences. They would therefore need very clear objectives in terms of clear, measurable outcomes;

- 6.4 the boards would be actively encouraged to build relations with think tanks and other innovative generators of policy thinking, including for example academics and relevant institutions, to ensure really high quality policy thinking and making the LGA a 'go to' one stop shop for local government expertise;
- 6.5 this should be proactively supported by public affairs and programme boards in particular, with more consistent and better co-ordination of public affairs and programme board activities – again this may be reflected structurally and in reporting lines in future.

Conclusions/ Next Steps

- 7. This paper seeks to take forward the previous paper and subsequent discussion of it in a way that fairly represents the views of those present, thoughtfully tackles what has been a thorny issue to date, and moves towards a successful resolution.
- 8. The refined approach as outlined will
 - 8.1 provide a stronger, sharper, more co-ordinated focus to LGA communications generally;
 - 8.2 mean better co-ordination between the three critical policy and communications-generating parts of the LGA – the programme boards, political offices, and communications function itself;
 - 8.3 not see unelected officers taking precedence or a greater prominence over elected members;
 - 8.4 provide a clearly defined, profile-raising role for the Chairman.