

Cross-improvement Communications Strategy: Q1 update

Purpose of Report

For information.

Is this report confidential? No

Summary

This paper provides an update on progress across in Q1 of 2023/24 relating to the promotion of the LGA's sector support offer and the impact of its programmes, as part of wider work being undertaken through the cross-improvement communications strategy.

LGA Plan Theme: Communications and events

Recommendations

That the Board note progress during Q1 of 2023/24 across a number of communications, marketing and events activity linked to the LGA's sector support offer and the impact of its programmes.

That the Board offer any further insight on the focus of resources and activity for the remainder of 2023/24.

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Cross-improvement Communications Strategy: Q1 update

Background

1. The LGA provides wide-ranging improvement support for councils through its sector support offer, which helps councils to improve and address current and emerging challenges and helps provide greater assurance for the sector.
2. The sector support offer encompasses LGA improvement programmes, including Partners in Care and Health (PCH), Children's Services Improvement, One Public Estate (OPE), the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and Cyber, Digital and Technology (CDT). It also features the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) funded Sector Support Programme. The corporate peer challenge offer, which is a key tool that contributes to assurance for councils, remains central to sector support offer for 2023/24.
3. A wide range of tools and approaches are used to communicate these offers to the sector. This includes the LGA website, social media, bulletins, events, reports and other publications.
4. In its February 2023 meeting, the Board considered a paper which set out our current tools, and approaches and set out an ambition to amplify and widen our messaging to key stakeholders – including ministers and parliamentarians, council leaders, councillors and local government officers, and the media. Across the first quarter (April-June 2023), there is both evidence and anecdotal feedback to show that there has been a positive step change in terms of our support and the results of this work.

Update on Q1 activity

Launch of sector support offer

5. Although the late agreement of the DLUHC grant has impacted on our plans to communicate this year's improvement offer, we have achieved strong levels of engagement. In June, we launched a new webpage and marketing for the new 2023/24 sector support offer across the LGA's social and owned media. In the first four weeks, we had more than 2,200 page views of the '[Sector support offer for local authorities 2023/24](#)' webpage and 850 unique visitors. We received particularly good engagement on LinkedIn and twitter, confirming these remain the preeminent channels for us communicating the offer to LGA members.

Media relations

6. In February's Board meeting we discussed the challenge of obtaining positive earned media for sector support programmes and improvement, noting that the

media tend to focus on national policy issues, meaning some improvement programmes will have more traction than others. Despite this caveat, the LGA media team has risen to this challenge and used key events, such as the official launch of the Office for Local Government (Oflog), to brief and place stories. We also issued a response to the announcement of Oflog at Annual Conference.

7. The run up to the launch of the Office for Local Government (Oflog) and the development of the LGA's assurance framework provided a platform to both proactive and reactive media. Cllr Abi Brown has been engaged and responsive as Board Chair, and has taken part in a number of media interviews, background briefings and provided statements during Q1.
8. Support and training has been given to enable key board spokespeople, supporting these members to take full advantage of speaking engagements and parliamentary and media opportunities when they arise. Dedicated media support has been available for the Improvement and Innovation Board Chair and Vice-chair.
9. In June, Cllr Abi Brown was interviewed by the MJ and the LGC about the launch of our sector support programme and the anticipated Oflog announcement. We issued a [press release about the launch of the Sector Support Programme for 2023/24](#).
10. We secured an [exclusive in the MJ](#) on our [press release quoting Cllr Brigid Jones](#) about the joint launch with Solace of an expanded suite of leadership development offers as part of our newly launched sector support programme, which will include a dedicated curriculum for chief executive development.
11. We have continued to look for broadcast opportunities: Sky News referenced the LGA's Next Generation and Be a Councillor programmes in [an article about latest census data showing how jobs had changed in the last 10 years](#), and that a third of elected officials were aged over 65.
12. Cllr Abi Brown took part in an LGC podcast – The Local Authority Podcast – with the theme supporting new councillors, following May's local elections.
13. [LGC](#) and [Public Sector Executive](#) covered our press release announcing the start of discussions led by the LGA on an assurance framework for local government. This is a result of the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge and will involve a system-wide mapping of the different assurance elements across the sector.
14. We sent a comment on a Woking Borough Council Corporate Peer Challenge report from 2019, and the LGA's CPC process more widely, to Public Finance. It explains that although CPCs provide effective strategic challenge and

improvement support to councils, they are not forensic investigations into council finances. It has also been briefed on our ongoing assurance framework exercise.

15. During Q1 there were a number of calls on the LGA for communications support – from councils in the media spotlight for a range of improvement and innovation issues. While we have been able to reach out to media teams for initial discussions, the changes to our funding in 2023/24 has meant that we no longer have UK Government-funded support to help councils with communications strategies or longer-term support.

Campaigns

16. The new pilot campaign to attract new talent and increase officer capacity in the sector will be strategically communicated with support from marketing professionals. This campaign will market local government as a career of choice, highlighting the infinite variety of roles that local government has to offer.
17. The pilot campaign will run in January in the North East region, reporting back with a proposal for its future direction by the end of March 2024. Although the campaign should act as an umbrella brand for all local government careers, which can be adapted to suit the needs of specific professions, initial stakeholder meetings are being organised in the region to explore the parameters for the pilot.
18. The team is also looking at data from the region to suggest which audiences the campaign should be targeted at to maximise the impact of the pilot. It is intended that the first engagement event should be held with the North East Regional Employers Organisation (NEREO).

New ways of sharing good practice

19. Our pilot project on effective and scalable ways for sector support teams to share good practice in order to build on the most effective of these approaches and secure wider engagement is moving into the next phase. The cyber, digital and technology programme is the focus of a pilot to test methods of communicating good practice, trailing how content is presented and target specific audiences.
20. We are also exploring ways to capture and share case studies presented at this year's Innovation Zone beyond the event in order that more local authorities can benefit from that learning.

Events

21. As can be seen in **Item 9** of this agenda, the Innovation Zone at this year's annual conference was the biggest and most successful on record with the theme

‘Challenge and change’. With an unprecedented number of applications (200+ applying to take part this year) and featuring 50 presentations involving over 40 different councils and over 100 speakers, there was a real buzz to this part of the conference.

22. However, we were mindful to ensure improvement and innovation was present across other parts of the conference with opportunities to discuss this work more widely at conference and to hear from figures – such as Lord Morse (Oflog) and Clive Betts MP, Chair, Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.
23. It also offered a chance to promote our offer in closed sessions for new leaders and for new chief executives, a closed session for chief executives on sector-led improvement and assurance, and a feedback session to inform the sector-wide work around mapping the local government improvement and assurance framework.
24. On other events, we will be launching the November member peer conference soon. We will be working with the planning team to develop a communications plan for this event to build momentum and interest ahead of the gathering, to capture content and testimonials during the event for contemporaneous use and longer-term marketing, and to raise the profile of this work with our members.

Public affairs

25. Recognising the need to find ways to engage Vice Presidents and parliamentary audiences with our sector support offer and improvement and assurance issues, we now have a member of the public affairs team who has added this area to their portfolio. This will help us identify more opportunities to highlight the impact of sector support to MPs and peers,
26. We continue to monitor and brief on the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill and also submitted written and oral evidence to Select Committee inquiries examining the work of councils including the LUHC Committee’s inquiry into Financial Reporting and Audit. Oflog was mentioned in relation to a question on making as much data as possible available to the public. LG Inform and the LGA Improvement Grant were also mentioned by a witness, Rob Whiteman (Chief Executive of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA)) as being equally important in this goal.
27. In a recent question in the House of Lords, the LGA’s sector support programme was praised, referencing our support for disabled councillors and work to support more people with disabilities to stand for local office.

Communications support and improvement

28. Communications support has been funded through the core improvement grant since 2015/16, and since then has become a highly popular service with member councils. Since 2019, 129 different local authorities have received at least one form of direct support. This does not include ad hoc support around issues such as media relations advice or speaking at / attendance at events.
29. With this area of our work not included in the 2023/24 improvement grant, we have agreement from the LGA Board to be able to draw upon up to £75,000 from reserves in the current financial year to help cover staff salaries and on-costs, as we develop, market test and deliver a new programme on a cost-recovery basis.
30. Following positive discussions with councils and sector groups, we are confident that there are opportunities for members to benefit from the expertise in the LGA communications improvement team on a cost recovery basis. We also continue to work with Principal Advisers to provide ad hoc advice and support when councils are in the eye of a media or political storm. We will, though, no longer be able to provide free-of charge long-term/regular communications support, such as happened recently with Thurrock where we funded a dedicated communications officer.

Implications for Wales

31. The Sector Support Offer is provided to English authorities. The LGA will look to make resources available to the WLGA and Welsh authorities where possible.

Financial Implications

32. There are no financial implications, beyond those in paragraph 30 relating to funding for communications improvement.

Equalities implications

33. There are no equalities implications arising from the activity in this report.

Next steps

34. A further update will be provided at a suitable meeting after Q2.