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Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council

Communications Strategy Internal Audit

August 2021

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Report distribution:

For action:

- Communications and Promotions Officer
- Communications and PR Officer
- Web Officer

Responsible Executives:

- Director (Corporate Services)

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1. Executive Summary

Background

An audit of the Council's communication strategy was undertaken as part of the approved internal audit plan for 2020/21.

Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council has a duty to provide a wide range of services that are delivered to the community as part of their ongoing objectives. The Council are committed to keeping citizens and communities informed about the services they deliver, activities and events.

The three ambitions of the Council's 2019 strategy are to:

1. Inform people about the services the Council provides so that residents and businesses make the best possible use of council services.

2. Show that the Council is providing value for money in what they do. As well as ensuring that their customers use the services provided for them as efficiently and as effectively as possible.

3. Be accountable to local people. To build trust by listening to their residents and representatives of local people, act upon them and tell them what action has been taken.

During 2020/21, effective communication with citizens, communities and stakeholders has been a far greater priority to enable the Council to appropriately support the local population throughout the pandemic and keep them well-informed and safe.

In particular, local businesses have needed to respond to the national restrictions, potentially having to close and furlough staff, put in place remote working arrangements and for those businesses remaining open to the public, ensure appropriate social distancing measures have been put in place. It is likely that many will have turned to the Council for further support and advice during this time. Effective communication will have been key to the Council's response to the pandemic.

Objectives

Our review focussed on the following potential risks:

- The Council's online services are not user-friendly and accessible to the public.

- The Council does not have appropriate plans and controls in place to support the ambition to develop the Council's presence on social media.

- The Council does not have appropriate arrangements in place to inform people about the services the Council provides, reflecting known preferred methods of communication.

- The Council has not had effective arrangements in place for communication to local businesses during the pandemic.

- The Council does not collate views from service users and consider how they can shape future services in response to that feedback.

Further details on responsibilities, approach and scope are included the Audit Planning Brief dated May 2021.

Limitations in scope

Please note that our conclusion is limited by scope. It is limited to the risks outlined above. Other risks exist in this process which our review and therefore our conclusion has not considered. Where sample testing has been undertaken, our findings and conclusions are limited to the items selected for testing.

This report does not constitute an assurance engagement as set out under ISAE 3000.

1. Executive Summary

Conclusion

SIGNIFICANT ASSURANCE WITH SOME IMPROVEMENT REQUIRED

We have reviewed the Council's Communications Strategy and the relevant controls. The controls tested are set out in our Audit Planning Brief.

We have concluded that the processes provide **Significant level of assurance with improvement required** to the Council. There are some minor weaknesses in the controls designed to mitigate the Communication Strategy risks examined during this audit.

Our work has focused on the areas identified as presenting the greatest risk to the overall success of the Communications Strategy.

Objectives / Risks reviewed	Assurance rating and number of recommendations
The Council's online services are not user-friendly and accessible to the public	Significant Assurance (no recommendations)
The Council does not have appropriate plans and controls in place to support the ambition to develop the Council's presence on social media.	Significant assurance with some improvement required (1 low risk)
The Council does not have appropriate arrangements in place to inform people about the services the Council provides, reflecting known preferred methods of communication.	Significant assurance (no recommendations)
The Council has not had effective arrangements in place for communication to local businesses during the pandemic.	Significant Assurance with some improvement required (1 improvement)
The Council does not collate views from service users and consider how they can shape future services in response to that feedback.	Significant Assurance (no recommendations)

1. Executive Summary

Good practice

1. Through customer consultations and usability reports, the Council has been able to improve the content and design of the site, as well as usability and accessibility. The aim is to make online communication the preferred choice. It is recognised that usability reports do not determine the preferred methods of communication for its customer.

2. The Council has an effective Social Media Policy in place to set its purpose, scope and principles. In addition, internal documents which outline the Council's social media style and tone are available and used for training to allow consistency in the Council's approach to social media.

3. The Council website has extensive accessibility options and customers are able to tailor text, colour and font. The Council provides a text relay service for people who are deaf, speech impaired, or hearing impaired or have a speech impediment. BrowseAloud is available for people who have poor vision, low literacy levels or have disabilities such as dyslexia. This allows content to be read aloud, magnified or accessed with a screen mask as an example.

4. The Council's website is currently ranked number 3 (risen from 4 in the previous index) by the Silktide Index of UK Councils' websites. The Index is a league table showing how organisations compare for web accessibility. Silktide works as SOCITIM (Society for Innovation, Technology and Modernisation) accessibility partner.

Areas for development

1. The Council does not have an overarching document in place to formally review progress in meeting the goals and targets set out in the 2019 Communications Strategy. However, SLT does receive web and social media reports on progress against areas within the strategy. The strategy is refreshed every 3 years. With no formal progress reviews in place, it is difficult to track whether the level of improvement the Council is seeking is being delivered as with each new strategy the baseline is reset.

Areas for development continued

2. The Council does not have a detailed action plan in place to support the ambition to develop the Council's presence on social media.

3. The Council does not have a definitive file containing all the arrangements and chosen methods for contacting local businesses during the pandemic. This may lead to gaps in opportunities to review and expand methods of communicating with local businesses.

Recommendations

We have raised 2 recommendations to address the minor control weaknesses identified for 2020/21.

	High	Med	Low	Imp
Detailed findings	-	-	1	1

Acknowledgement

We would like to take this opportunity to thank your staff for their co-operation during this internal audit.

2. Detailed Findings & Action Plans

2.1	Low	The Council does not have appropriate plans and controls in place to support the ambition to develop the Council's presence on social media.

Finding and implication	Audit recommendation	Management response and actions
The Council has a social media policy in place to set the purpose, scope and principles. In addition, the Council has a prescribed 'social media style' and media tone. These are internal documents used for training any new social media editors and were developed internally by the social media editor group. Within the Communications Strategy, social media goals and objectives are laid out so the team knows what they are working towards. In the current Communications Strategy the Council has the aim of achieving 10,700 Facebook page likes, equivalent to 10% of the resident population for the borough and 6,300 Twitter subscribers by the end of 2021. As at the time of the audit fieldwork the Council had achieved 10,050 Facebook page likes (94% of the target) and 6,105 Twitter Subscribers (97% of the target). We have seen that the Council does currently track and monitor progress for specific elements of the strategy. This is evident in the Web and Social Media Reports, and Usability Reports. However, whilst the specific goals and targets for social media are contained within the Council's overall Communications Strategy, and data is gathered in relation to progress being made, we noted that there is no overarching document tracking targets, progress in meeting these, and actions required to deliver the strategy. The provision of such a document would provide a "one stop" resource to track progress of the current strategy and inform the development of the fourth Communications Strategy for the three years from 2022.	R1 (Low): As part of the Communication Strategy, a detailed action plan should be put in place to support the ambition to develop the Council's presence on social media. The Council should also ensure that they regularly monitor, review and report progress in delivering the current strategy in order to inform and plan the next strategy, taking into account feedback from the previous three years.	**Management Response:** Accepted **Agreed Actions:** An action plan will be developed and agreed by SLT **Responsible Officer:** Jacqueline Puffett **Executive Lead:** Julie Kenny – Director (Corporate Services) **Due date:** November 2021

2. Detailed Findings & Action Plans

2.2	Improvement	The Council has not had effective arrangements in place for communication to local businesses during the pandemic.

Finding and implication	Audit recommendation	Management response and actions
The Council has a number of ways in which it contacts businesses, although business communications have been focused through LinkedIn, Twitter and provision of the Council dropping letters door to door to raise awareness of the support available for local businesses. The Council also works with Hinckley BID (the loyalty card providing savings at local shops and venues) and The Hinckley Times and has developed the Council's social media brand to target, communicate with and promote local businesses. In addition to this, there is an email circulation list provided by environmental health that is used to send out emails to communicate with local businesses within the area that are licenced and registered with environmental health. This list is comprehensive and ensures that all licensed businesses can be contacted. In addition to promoting grants via letters, email and the Council website, the Communication Team also ensures that Customer Services know when there are new grants so that if local businesses contact them and have missed other communication, they can discuss all options with them. Whilst there are a number of methods that the Council uses to contact local businesses, the Council does not have an overarching document that captures all the methods of communicating with businesses and monitors the impact and effectiveness of these methods. Currently, there is no assessment or feedback sought for the effectiveness of the methods used.	R3 (Improvement): It is recommended that the Council creates on overarching document that captures and monitors their methods of communication. In this way, the Council will be able to assess the efficiency of each method and find any gaps or opportunities to expand methods of communication.	**Management Response:** Accepted **Agreed Actions:** At the next revision of the Communications Strategy we will consider how this can be actioned given that teams administer this information across the council. **Responsible Officer:** Jacqueline Puffett **Executive Lead:** Julie Kenny – Director (Corporate Services) **Due date:** March 2022

3. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Staff involved and documents reviewed

Staff involved

- Jacqueline Puffett - Communications and Promotions Officer

- Clare Maddison - Communications and PR Officer

- Anne Jones – Web Officer

Documents reviewed

- Social Media Policy and Guidelines (August 2013)

- Strategic Leadership Team Report (September 2020)

- Web and Social Media Quarterly Reports

- Web Strategy (May 2021)

- Usability Report (Dec 2018, April 2019 & October 2019)

- Communications Strategy (2019)

Appendix 2 – Our assurance levels

The table below shows the levels of assurance we provide and guidelines for how these are arrived at. We always exercise professional judgement in determining assignment assurance levels, reflective of the circumstances of each individual assignment.

Rating	Description
Significant assurance	Overall, we have concluded that, in the areas examined, the risk management activities and controls are suitably designed to achieve the risk management objectives required by management. These activities and controls were operating with sufficient effectiveness to provide significant assurance that the related risk management objectives were achieved during the period under review. Might be indicated by no weaknesses in design or operation of controls and only IMPROVEMENT recommendations.
Significant assurance with some improvement required	Overall, we have concluded that in the areas examined, there are only minor weaknesses in the risk management activities and controls designed to achieve the risk management objectives required by management. Those activities and controls that we examined were operating with sufficient effectiveness to provide reasonable assurance that the related risk management objectives were achieved during the period under review. Might be indicated by minor weaknesses in design or operation of controls and only LOW rated recommendations.
Partial assurance with improvement required	Overall, we have concluded that, in the areas examined, there are some moderate weaknesses in the risk management activities and controls designed to achieve the risk management objectives required by management. Those activities and controls that we examined were operating with sufficient effectiveness to provide partial assurance that the related risk management objectives were achieved during the period under review. Might be indicated by moderate weaknesses in design or operation of controls and one or more MEDIUM or HIGH rated recommendations.
No assurance	Overall, we have concluded that, in the areas examined, the risk management activities and controls are not suitably designed to achieve the risk management objectives required by management. Those activities and controls that we examined were not operating with sufficient effectiveness to provide reasonable assurance that the related risk management objectives were achieved during the period under review Might be indicated by significant weaknesses in design or operation of controls and several HIGH rated recommendations.

Appendix 2 – Our assurance levels *(cont'd)*

The table below describes how we grade our audit recommendations.

Rating	Description	Possible features
High	Findings that are fundamental to the management of risk in the business area, representing a weakness in the design or application of activities or control that requires the immediate attention of management	- Key activity or control not designed or operating effectively - Potential for fraud identified - Non-compliance with key procedures / standards - Non-compliance with regulation
Medium	Findings that are important to the management of risk in the business area, representing a moderate weakness in the design or application of activities or control that requires the immediate attention of management	- Important activity or control not designed or operating effectively - Impact is contained within the department and compensating controls would detect errors - Possibility for fraud exists - Control failures identified but not in key controls - Non-compliance with procedures / standards (but not resulting in key control failure)
Low	Findings that identify non-compliance with established procedures, or which identify changes that could improve the efficiency and/or effectiveness of the activity or control but which are not vital to the management of risk in the business area.	- Minor control design or operational weakness - Minor non-compliance with procedures / standards
Improvement	Items requiring no action but which may be of interest to management or which represent best practice advice	- Information for management - Control operating but not necessarily in accordance with best practice

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