

Date: 18 November 2022

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Dear Huw,

### **PRAP Scrutiny Committee 15 November 2022: Communications & External Relations**

On behalf of the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee my sincere thanks for attending Committee on 15 November 2022 to brief Committee on the Communications and External Relations service. Please also pass on my appreciation to the Head of Performance and Partnerships, Gareth Newell and Head of External Relations, Tim Gordon, whose presentation was really helpful in explaining the breadth of tasks, challenges and achievements. The Committee and I were pleased to welcome you all in-person, and I have been asked to pass on Members' comments and observations following discussion at the Way Forward.

#### **An effective service**

The Committee unanimously agreed that this is an effective service, operating well and delivering good work against the backdrop of increasing service demand and decreasing budgets. The focus is clearly on digital media, to develop the Council's own audience and deliver its own news.

#### **Improving understanding of Council services**

Members feel strongly that there are gaps in the public's understanding of Council functions and services. For example, misunderstanding around the Council funding large projects as a part of its Capital Programme versus delivering frontline services from its Revenue budget. We consider there is an opportunity to improve the quality of information delivered via social media on issues such as finance and the RLDP to improve understanding. We note you see this as a constant challenge, referencing 'sentiment figures' and 'likes' as measures of success. We would also make a plea that you encourage the media to assist the Council in improving residents understanding of the services the Council is responsible for delivering. For example,

the media frequently uses the terminology 'affordable housing' which can be a lost opportunity to reflect the Council is proudly delivering 'Council housing.' We welcome the Head of Communications offer to address this distinction with media outlets.

### **Reaching vulnerable communities**

The Committee is reassured that policy development is well underway on strategies for reaching vulnerable communities and will feature in the communications part of the Participation Strategy to be delivered early next year. We look forward to engaging in the draft strategy in the new year.

### **Personal data**

Given the reactive nature of digital communications, the Committee is keen to ensure that there are effective strategies in place to manage a situation where a GDPR incident occurs. We urge you to ensure there are channel management systems to ensure personal data is re-directed.

### **Dealing with misinformation**

The Committee notes that tackling misinformation in a digital world is a key challenge and truthful content sits at the heart of the Council's media strategy. As we cannot block misinformation, it is important not to enter a cycle of misinformation. We endorse your focus on creating truthful content and explaining how residents can get help.

### **Support for Scrutiny**

The Committee considers Scrutiny an important route to public participation in decision making that would benefit from the excellent work of the Communications service. We note officers' views that news has to be compelling and of interest to residents, focussing on quality not quantity. However, Members consider scrutiny is a unique stakeholder and resident channel into the Council's decision-making.

The Head of Communications acknowledged the importance of scrutiny and proposed there is merit in scrutiny having its own Twitter account to post about its work, offering to advise scrutiny officers in setting this up and sharing tweets more widely. Members are uncomfortable with this proposal. We consider that scrutiny is

very much a part of the Council brand, and this is not a route that would achieve the best outcome for the service, particularly given the level of clearances that form a critical part of maintaining control over media messaging. We therefore urge that our work is promoted on the Council's main media channels, and the excellent work delivered on the Council's Twitter feed during Full Council meetings, is afforded other committees.

Thank you for the recommendation to link with the Local Government Correspondent, based at Wales online, delivering Local Government content on a wire to multi-media outlets funded by BBC. We have taken your advice. I can confirm that scrutiny chairs recently met with the Correspondent and are planning a programme of releases on their work over the coming months.

### **Clear lines**

We concur with you that communications with the media need clear lines about the roles of Cabinet and Scrutiny. However, we consider there is a real opportunity to improve public understanding of the work of both bodies within the democratic process. Members propose that the work of scrutiny is referenced in all press releases on Cabinet items programmed for scrutiny, together with an electronic link to relevant scrutiny papers. We are pleased you agreed to consider this where timings allow. We are therefore making this a **recommendation** as set out below.

### **External opportunities**

Members consider this service would be attractive to other councils/organisations, in a similar way that the Bi-lingual Cardiff service has successfully expanded its work. We note officers' views that this would be more feasible for graphic design than for a reactive communications service. We note also that capacity would need to be built to consider this approach.

### **Recommendations following the scrutiny:**

To summarise, the Committee makes 1 formal recommendation as set out below. As part of the response to this letter I would be grateful if you could, for each recommendation, state whether the recommendation is accepted, partially accepted or not accepted and summarise the Cabinet's response. If the recommendation is accepted or partially accepted I would also be grateful if you could identify the

responsible officer and provide an action date. This will ensure that progress can be monitored as part of the approach agreed by Cabinet in December 2020.

<b>Recommendation</b>	Accepted, Partially Accepted or Not Accepted	Cabinet Response	Responsible Officer	Action Date
That the work of scrutiny is referenced in all press releases on Cabinet items programmed for scrutiny, together with an electronic link to relevant scrutiny papers.				

Finally, on behalf of the Committee, thank you once again for a full and enjoyable briefing on the Communications and External Relations service. I look forward to continuing the valuable internal challenge established between this Committee and the Cabinet, and to your response.

Yours sincerely,



**COUNCILLOR JOEL WILLIAMS**  
**CHAIR, POLICY REVIEW AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

cc Members of the Policy Review & Performance Scrutiny Committee  
Leaders of Opposition Parties – Adrian Robson, Rhys Taylor & Andrea Gibson  
Gareth Newell, Head of Performance & Partnerships  
Tim Gordon, Head of Communications & External Relations  
Chris Pyke, OM Governance & Audit  
Jeremy Rhys, Assistant Head of Communications and External Affairs  
Gary Jones, Head of Democratic Services  
Debi Said, Cabinet Support Officer  
Joanne Watkins, Cabinet Business Manager  
Andrea Redmond, Committees Support Officer.