South Ayrshire Council

Report by Director of Communities and Transformation
to South Ayrshire Council (Special)
of 19 August 2024

Subject: Communications Review

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1.   Purpose

1.1   The purpose of this report is to provide Council with a review of activities undertaken by the Communications Team and to seek approval for revised staffing arrangements to prevent service failure and ensure the continued effective delivery of the service in light of growing demand.

2.   Recommendations

2.1   **It is recommended that the Council:**

      2.1.1   notes the review of activities and service trends (Appendices 1 to 3);

      2.1.2   consider staffing options provided and agree option (2)- to create 1 x level 10 Communications Officer post (£53,600) funded from an employee engagement budget in Organisational Development (OD) and 1 x level 7 Assistant Communications Officer (£39,500) post funded by deleting 1 x vacant Level 7 OD Assistant post. This is required to prevent service failure and ensure the continued delivery of the service; and

      2.1.3   approves minor edits to the Managing Work Related Social Media guidance detailed at Appendix 4 in line with Internal Audit recommendations.

3.   Background

3.1   The role of the Communications Team is to support the Council and its services to inform the public and staff about the work of the Council. This includes providing information on and promoting our services and facilities; information on Council decisions and plans; and promoting the area as a destination of choice. Services are responsible for initiating and managing local communications plans and the Communications Team provide a professional communications, design and media relations service to support these.

3.2   In line with all Local Authorities, the Communications Team must work in accordance with the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1986 and the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2006. The Code states that it is inappropriate for public resources to be used to publicise individual councillors, or material which appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party.

The Code stipulates that councils must achieve the greatest possible cost-effectiveness regarding publicity and that the focus of publicity should be on the functions of a local authority as discharged by the council corporately. Activities carried out by the Communications team are carried out in line with this guidance.

3.3 At its meeting of 28 November 2023, Cabinet requested that a review of the activities of the Communications Team be brought forward within 6 months. Consideration of this paper was then postponed as a result of the pre-election period.

Findings

3.4 In reviewing the activities carried out by the Communications Team the following were considered:

3.4.1 **Service Trends** - trends in terms of activities and demand for the service can be viewed at Appendix 1. These have identified significant growth in a range of areas including:

- **Increased social media followers, reach and engagement** – Social media enables us to get the council's message out quickly and inexpensively and to engage with the public. We have increased followers from 21,106 across 3 channels in 2020 to 62,295 followers across 6 channels (as at April 2024). This requires increasing resource to create content and manage and monitor channels, including responding to the increasing number of queries received via social media.

- **Increased number of campaigns** – significant work has been undertaken to encourage services to take a strategic approach to communications. This has seen an increase in campaigns from 63 in 2020 to 199 in 2023 (216% increase), which continues to rise. Campaigns vary in size and complexity and time spent by the Communications Team ranges from around 20 hours for a very short campaign to 880 hours spent on the largest, most complex campaign. Campaigns are led by officers in conjunction with services and the increasing volume and complexity of campaigns is not sustainable without a third Communications Officer.

- **Increased events promotion and coverage** – the Council Plan has a renewed focus on council run/sponsored events. This has resulted in a significant increase in promotional and branding work, as well as some 'live' coverage at a range of council run weekend events. Weekend coverage of events is agreed with the Destination South Ayrshire team and signed off by the Director – Communities and Transformation. Prior to 2022, there was no requirement for weekend event coverage. In 2023, the team provided live coverage of weekend events on 18 occasions.

- **Increase in demand for in house design** – We provide a professional, free design and animation service and demand has risen from 121 jobs in 2021 to 170 in 2023. In 2023, the service saved the council £100,000[i] (an increase from £42,000 in 2021).

The current substantive structure is not adequate to support this volume and increasing complexity of work, including digital animation.

3.4.2   **Evaluation of activities –** the service continuously evaluates the impact of activities, with all campaigns being evaluated for effectiveness against agreed objectives and social media trends analysed to support continued growth in followers and engagement. Feedback has also been sought from services, staff and stakeholders. A public survey was carried out in autumn 2022, with further surveys planned for 2024/25. Evaluations show the positive impact of campaigns, and feedback from client services and stakeholders on the work of the service is extremely positive. Feedback from Communications staff, however, indicates high pressure due to the volume of output and activities with insufficient resource or capacity in the service. A summary of evaluation activities can be viewed at Appendix 2.

3.4.3   **Benchmarking exercise** - A national benchmarking exercise of local authority communications teams (Appendix 3) shows that South Ayrshire Council's Communications Team carries out a wider range of activities than most respondent teams in Scotland yet is smaller than average in terms of FTE. While the average number of corporate communications teams is 7 FTE, teams carrying out a similar volume and range of activities have a minimum of 9 and maximum of 15 officers

Options

3.5   The substantive structure of Communications is 6 FTE. This is not enough to deliver the volume, range and quality of communications currently provided and to support the growing demands on the service. In 2023, additional support was required from officers in Organisational Development and Economy and Regeneration to avoid service failure. Since September 2023, an OD Assistant has been required to support communications activities on a full-time basis to prevent service failure. Two options with regard to staffing have been identified for consideration:

3.5.1   Option 1 – Retain current substantive staffing model of 6 FTE. This option represents a real term staffing reduction and will result in an inability to manage current and increasing demands on the service. The current staffing establishment cannot keep up with demand and this is having a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of the team. This option would therefore result in a reduction in communications activities and output including:

- Reducing the number of campaigns and activities delivered;

- Limiting weekend event coverage to the 2.5 days of the International Ayr Show;

- Reducing social media channels and followers; and

- Requiring services to outsource and pay for a percentage of design work.

3.5.2   Option 2 - Increase the team by 2 x FTE to ensure a structure which is more commensurate with Local Authority communications teams delivering a similar range and volume of activities and which will ensure the continued delivery of the service in light of growing demand. To maintain current output, the following roles are required:

- 1 x additional level 10 Communications Officer post to be funded from an underspent recurring employee engagement budget in OD to ensure the continued delivery of the service and support the increase in activities including campaigns, media engagement and strategic communications support; and

- 1 x additional level 7 Assistant Communications Officer to support the increase in design work, social media, advertising and campaigns. It is proposed that this is funded by deleting 1 x vacant Level 7 OD Assistant post.

3.5.3   The staffing model proposed by option 2 can be viewed in the table below. It is also proposed that job titles are streamlined as per the table below.

Current Job Title	Grade	Number	Proposed Job Title	Grade	Number
Coordinator – Public Affairs	13	1	Communications Coordinator	13	1
Communications Officer	10	2	Communications Officer	10	3
Design & Marketing Officer	9	1	Graphic and Digital Design Officer	9	1
Assistant Communications Officer	7	2	Assistant Communications Officer	7	3
Total FTE		**6**			**8**

3.5.4   While option 2 involves deleting 1 post in OD, it should be noted that work which was previously carried out by OD, including the establishment of corporate social media channels, elements of employee communications and the council's magazine, transferred to the Communications Team in 2019 without additional resource. Given that an OD Assistant is currently fully focused on communications activities to prevent service failure in Communications, the impact on OD output will be minimal. The table below shows the staffing impact on OD.

Current Job Title	Grade	Current	Grade	Proposed
Coordinator OD and Customer Services	13	1	13	1
OD Advisor	10	3	10	3
OD Assistant	7	3 (1 supporting Communications)	7	2
Total FTE		**7**		**6**

4.   Proposals

4.1   The recommended option is Option 2, as the current staffing complement in the Communications Team cannot manage the increased demands on the team detailed at section 4 of this report. If this option is not approved, there will be a significant reduction in communications activities as summarised at 5.1.1 of this report.

4.2   Following an internal audit of corporate and service specific social media accounts, recommendations were made to make minor amendments to the Managing Work Related Social Media Guidance for employees as detailed at Appendix 4. It is proposed that the Council approves these changes.

5.   Legal and Procurement Implications

5.1   There are no legal implications arising from this report.

5.2   There are no procurement implications arising from this report.

6.   Financial Implications

6.1   The recommended option would cost £93,100 annually funded as per table below.

Post	Cost	Funding
Comms Assistant x 1	£39,500	To be funded by deleting 1 x vacant Level 7 OD Assistant posts
Comms Officer	£53,600	To be funded from an underspent recurring employee engagement budget in OD

7.   Human Resources Implications

7.1   Creation of 1 x additional level 7 Assistant Communications Officer (and deletion of 1 x vacant OD Assistant) and creation of 1 x level 10 Communications Officer on structure.

7.2   Amendment to job titles as per 3.5.3 of this report.

8.   Risk

8.1   *Risk Implications of Adopting the Recommendations*

      8.1.1   There are no risks associated with adopting the recommendations.

8.2   *Risk Implications of Rejecting the Recommendations*

      8.2.1   The risks associated with rejecting the recommended option are that we will not be able to continue to deliver the activities provided by the Communications Team. This could include a significant reduction in the number of communications campaigns produced; more limited social media; a reduction in social media channels; limited use of YouTube,

video or animation; events coverage reduced to the *International Ayr Show* and a requirement for services to outsource a volume of design work.

9.   Equalities

9.1   The proposals within this report have been assessed through the EQIA scoping process and there are no significant potential positive or negative equality impacts in agreeing the proposals, therefore an EQIA is not required.

10.   Sustainable Development Implications

10.1   ***Considering Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)*** - This report does not propose or seek approval for a plan, policy, programme or strategy or document otherwise described which could be considered to constitute a plan, programme, policy or strategy.

11.   Options Appraisal

11.1   Two options have been provided for consideration.

12.   Link to Council Plan

12.1   Communications is an enabling service and the matters referred to in this report contribute to all priorities of the Council Plan.

13.   Results of Consultation

13.1   There has been public consultation on communications via a survey. Feedback from this survey can be found at Appendix 2.

13.2   Consultation has taken place with Councillor Martin Dowey, Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Strategic, and the contents of this report reflect any feedback provided.

13.3   Consultation has taken place with Trade Unions, and the contents of this report reflect any feedback provided.

13.4   Consultation has taken place with staff, and the contents of this report reflect any feedback provided.

14.   Next Steps for Decision Tracking Purposes

14.1   If the recommendations above are approved by Members, the Director of Communities and Transformation will ensure that all necessary steps are taken to ensure full implementation of the decision within the following timescales, with the completion status reported to the Cabinet in the 'Council and Cabinet Decision Log' at each of its meetings until such time as the decision is fully implemented:

Implementation	*Due date*	*Managed By*
Implement new staffing arrangements	30 November 2024	Service Lead – OD and Customer Services

Background Papers   Report to Cabinet of 28 November 2023 – <u>**Communications Strategy 2023-28 and Communications Team Staffing Proposals**</u>

Person to Contact   Gillian Farrell, Service Lead, Organisational Development and Customer Services.
County Buildings
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Date: 9 August 2024

Communications Review – Service Trends

Service Trends - A review of service trends shows that, while some activities and demands on the service have remained relatively steady, there has been significant growth in others, placing increased demand and pressure on the team. No areas of work have decreased.

Advertising

The Communications Team work in partnership with AdWorks to provide advertising services on behalf of all areas of the council. Demand for this service has grown significantly as evidenced in the graph below. The coordination of advertising is carried out primarily by Assistant Communications Officers.
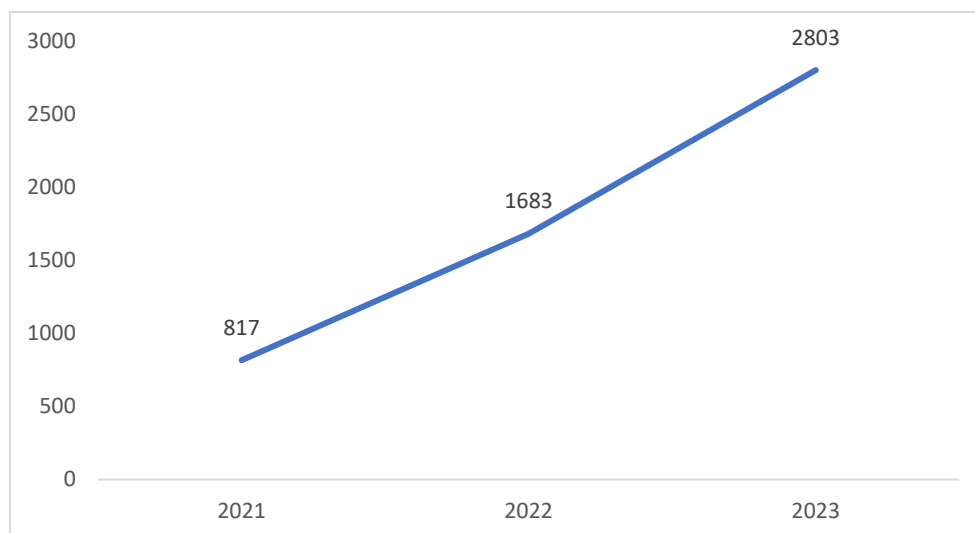

Social Media Trends

The graph below shows the significant, continuing increase in followers across 6 corporate social media channels (as at March of each year) requiring increasing resource to create content, manage enquiries/ engagements and carry out analytics.
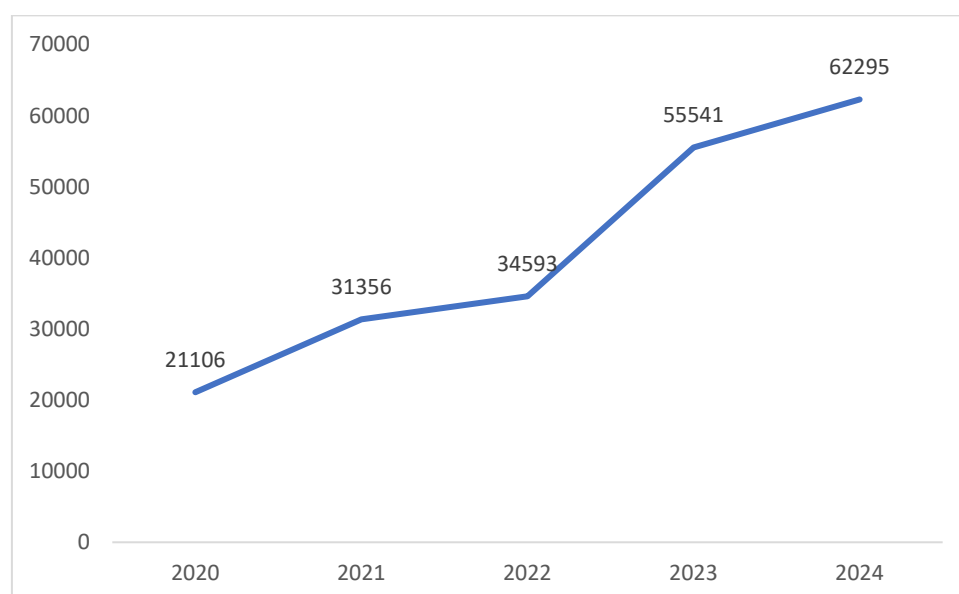
Campaign trends

A communications campaign is a series of communications activities to provide information, promote council services, initiatives or events, or to encourage behaviour change. Time spent on campaigns ranges from 20 hours for very short, straightforward campaigns to large scale, complex campaigns at 880 hours. Campaigns require significant Communications Officer time. The graph below shows campaign trends for calendar years from 2020 to 2023, highlighting a significant and continuous increase year on year.
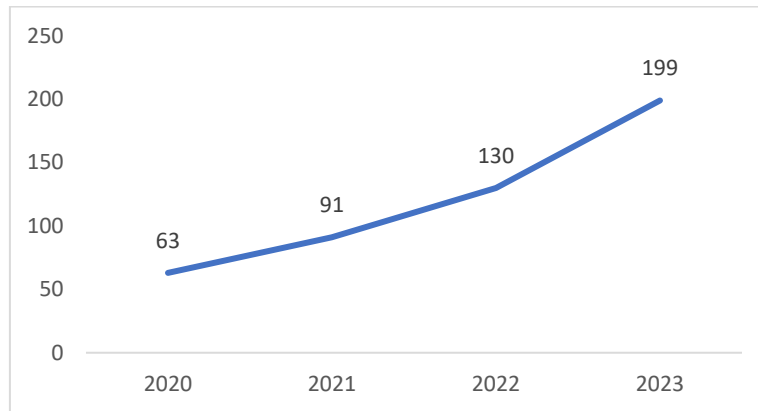


Events promotion and coverage

The team provide 'live' coverage of council sponsored events in line with a pre-agreed calendar[1]. The graph below shows trends in weekend event coverage. Given that the team was boosted by 2x FTE temporary support in 2023, the team were present at weekend events on 18 occasions.
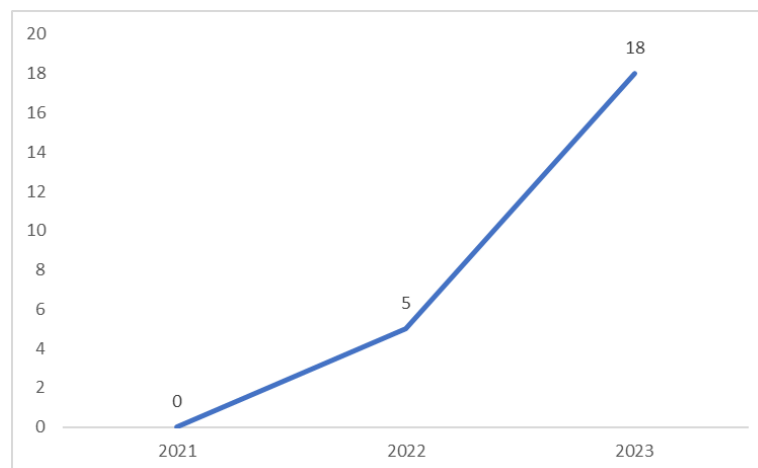

In House Design Trends

The graph below highlights the increasing demand on our professional, in-house design service, showing the number of design jobs by calendar year 2021 to 2023.

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[1] *Communications attendance at weekend events are pre planned for each calendar year in conjunction with DSA and agreed by the Director Communities and Transformation. Live coverage is predicated on evaluating the impact of previous years' coverage and assessing whether promotional activities in advance of the event are more effective.*
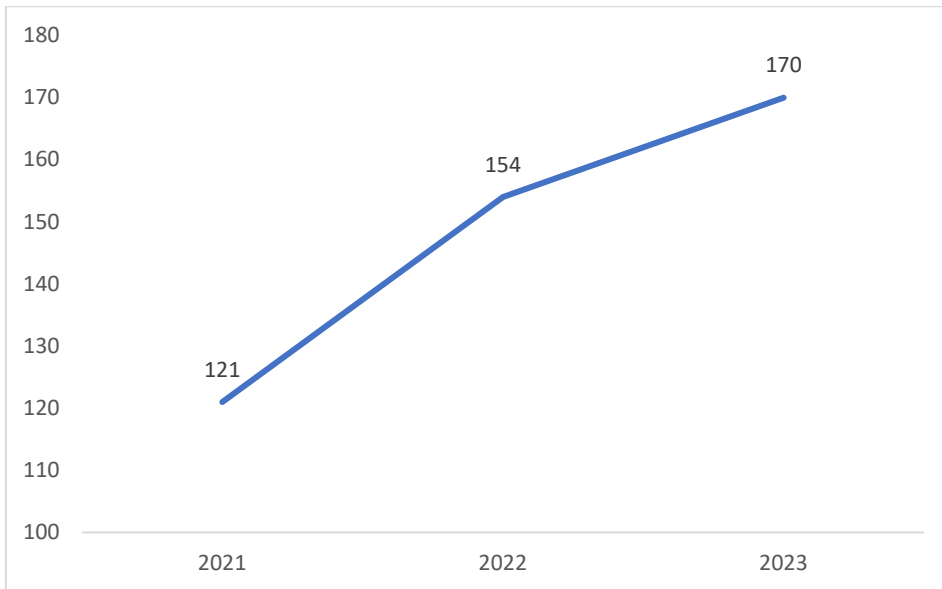
In House Design Savings

The availability of an in-house design services avoids the cost of outsourcing design work. Savings by year are shown in the graph below. These are calculated at market rate.
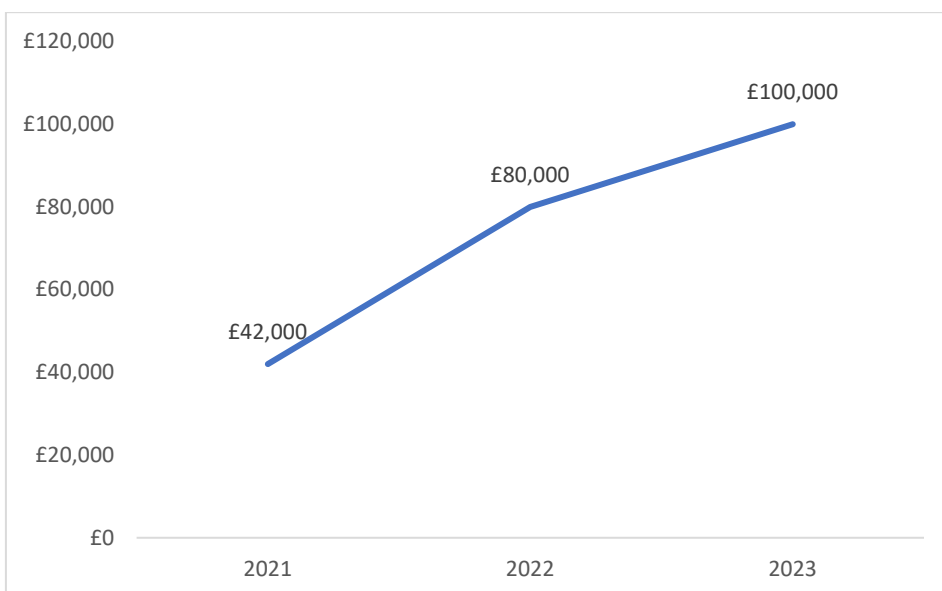
Communications Review – Evaluation of Activities

Campaign evaluations

All campaigns are evaluated for effectiveness against the objectives set by the client service. These evaluations include a review of communications activities and tools used including, where appropriate, any digital or social media reach and engagement; media and press coverage (including any TV and radio reach). Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive as can be seen in the chart below.
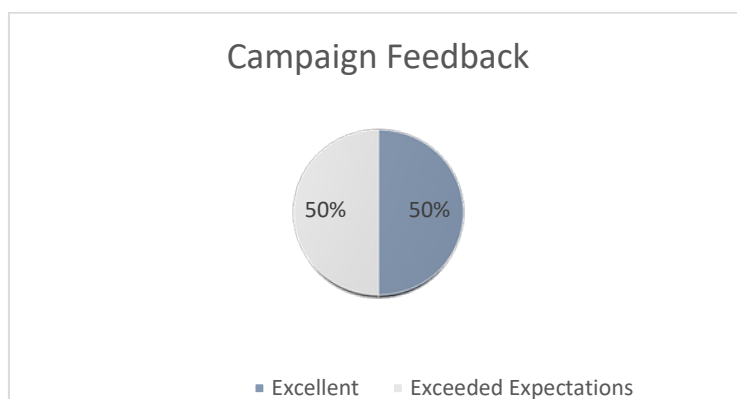

Feedback regarding the support provided by the Communications Team regarding campaigns was also positive, with a cross section of typical comments included below:

- *The Comms team was excellent to deal with – quick to respond and highly efficient in dealing with my request.*
- *Communications employees provided exceptional support and ideas to ensure the successful creation and delivery of the comms plan.*
- *All [comms] employees are helpful and are experienced in delivering the communications we require.*
- *The communications team are fantastic. Very responsive and give good advice on how to achieve your aims.*
- *Listened to what our service requirements were for the campaign and very helpful.*

Service Lead Survey

A survey was issued to all Service Leads in February 2024 asking them to evaluate the effectiveness of the services provided by the Communications Team. Service Lead ratings were all positive as can be seen in the chart below.
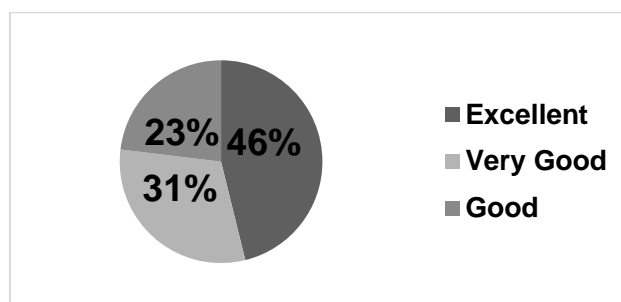
Communications Staff Feedback

The Communications team were asked to complete an anonymous online survey and took part in a focus group facilitated by another service. 100% of staff feel the team is under-resourced to deliver the current range of activities, particularly given the fact that temporary support has been required from other services. The team rated the pressure of work as very high, particularly in light of continued rising demands on the service and the range of activities performed.

Public Survey Findings

A public survey was carried out in autumn/ winter 2022, with further surveys planned for 2024/25. The diagram below shows feedback from the public on their communications preferences and is used to inform future campaigns.

Full survey results can be viewed at the following link –

https://www.south-ayrshire.gov.uk/media/7815/Public-Communications-Survey-Results/pdf/Public_Communications_Survey_Results.pdf?m=1676473972083

Communications Review

Benchmarking - *We carried out a benchmarking survey, inviting all Corporate Communications Teams in Scottish Local Authorities to take part. The survey ran from February- March 2024 and 21 authorities provided a response. The survey found that, while SAC Comms provides the highest range and volume of activities in most areas, we have fewer staff than councils carrying out like work. High level details, showing a comparison of SAC Communications activity across all respondents for a range of activities are included in the graphs below. Where a number shows on the X axis, this relates to the number of staff in each respondent communications team.*
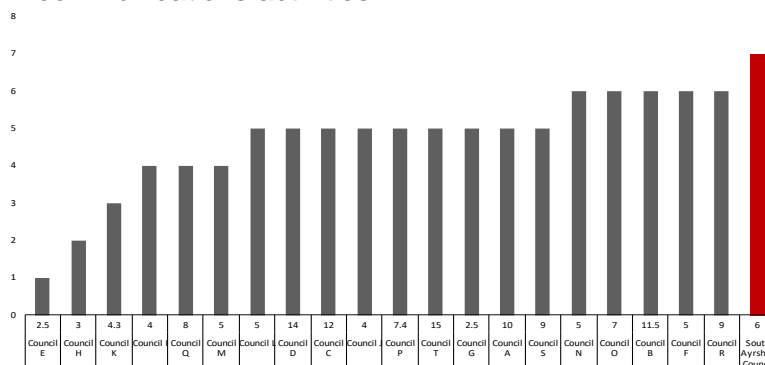
<u>**Headcount**</u> -The graph below shows that SAC, at 6 FTE, is below average (the average is 7) in terms of the number of FTE in Corporate Communications teams when compared with respondent councils.

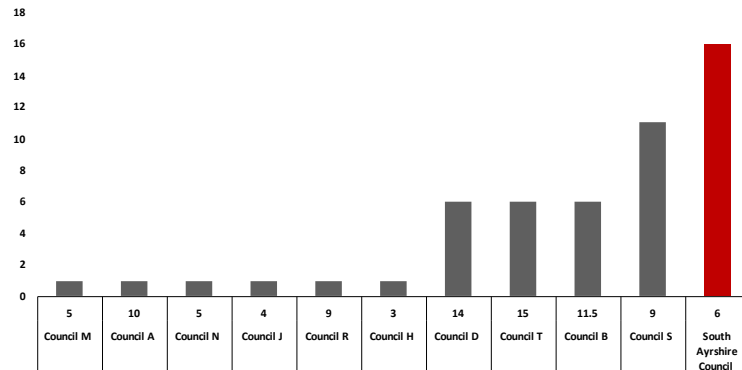# How we compare with other Councils – Staffing
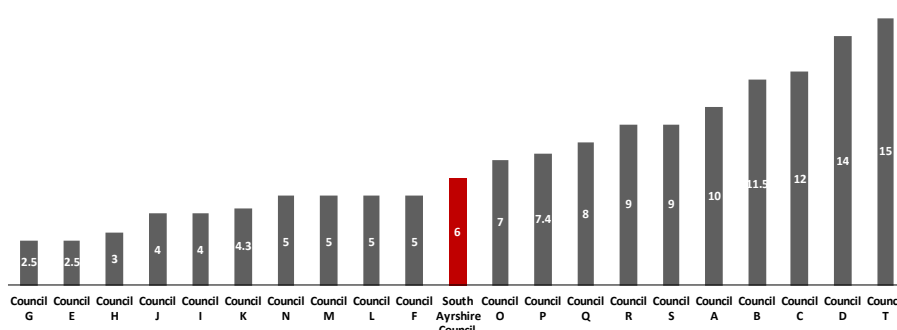
<u>**Communications Activities**</u> - The graph below shows that SAC corporate communications carry out a wider range of activities than other respondents. These include scripting and voicing digital communications and video creation and covering council sponsored events at weekends.

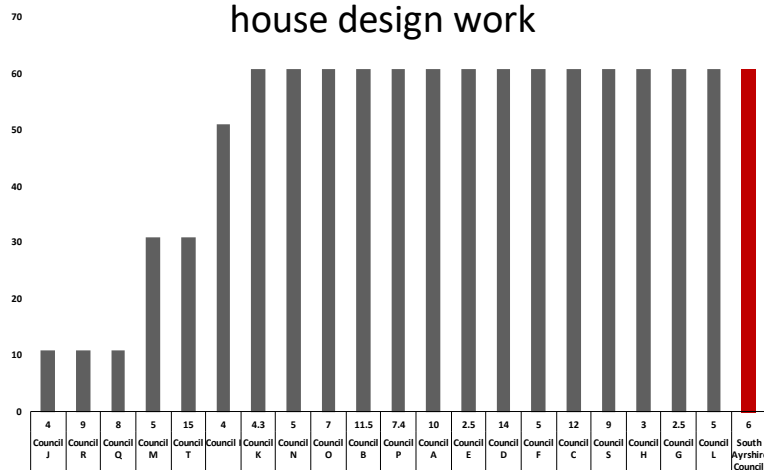How we compare with other Councils – general communications activities.

Output – weekend event coverage – The graph below shows that SAC Comms team provide 'live' coverage of the highest number weekend events per year, with most respondents' teams providing none.

How we compare with other Councils
Number of days - weekend event coverage

5	10	5	4	9	3	14	15	11.5	9	6
Council M	Council A	Council N	Council J	Council R	Council H	Council D	Council T	Council B	Council S	South Ayrshire Council

Output – design – The graph below shows how South Ayrshire compares with other teams for in-house design work produced.

How we compare with other Councils –In house design work

4	9	8	5	15	4	4.3	5	7	11.5	7.4	10	2.5	14	5	12	9	3	2.5	5	6
Council J	Council R	Council Q	Council M	Council T		Council K	Council N	Council O	Council B	Council P	Council A	Council E	Council D	Council F	Council C	Council S	Council H	Council G	Council L	South Ayrshire Council

<u>Output – campaigns -</u> The graph below shows that South Ayrshire is in the highest 30% for the number of campaigns delivered each year.

How we compare with other Councils — number of communications campaigns

2.5	5	9	7.4	4	5	12	4	11.5	15	3	14	8	5	2.5	4.3	7	5	10	9	6
Council E	Council M	Council S	Council P	Council I	Council L	Council C	Council J	Council B	Council T	Council H	Council D	Council Q	Council N	Council G	Council K	Council O	Council F	Council A	Council R	South Ayrshire Council
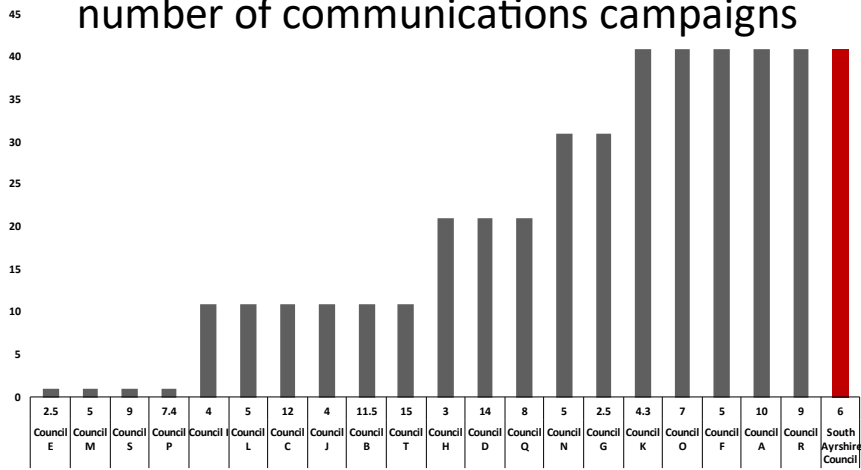
Communications Review - Proposed Amendments to Managing Work-related Social Media Guidance for Employees

The Managing Work-related Social Media Guidance for Employees was approved by Cabinet of 28 November 2023. Following feedback from an exercise carried out by Internal Audit, the following minor amendments (in bold) to the guidance are proposed:

- Page 6 – The following text has been added:
1. Paragraph 2 – has been updated to add detail on Digital Services and Information Security team roles in the process: **Services should not set up any local social media accounts without prior approval of the Communications team, the Information Security team and the Digital Services team**.

   Depending on the anticipated use and expected audience, it may also be necessary for the Information Security team to conduct a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) prior to approval being granted. The Information Security team will perform a risk assessment before granting a security exemption (a process that has to be carried out to allow you to access a local social media account from your Council device(s)) and may advise a DPIA be prepared prior to approval for review by the Information Governance team.'

   Paragraph 4 – added as the last sentence '**They will also advise if there are any ICT security issues with the type of account you are seeking to create**.'

   Paragraph 6 – added after paragraph 6 as the final paragraph: '**Ensure that any local accounts are live, and where they are not in use, advise the Digital Services team and the Communications team so they can delete the channel and remove it from the centrally held list of accounts.**'

- Page 7 – Added as a final paragraph: '**It's important that you clearly highlight to your audience, at an appropriate section at the top of your social media page, the hours the account is monitored.**'

- Page 8 - Page 8 – Added to the end of the first paragraph: '**For example, don't share posts from political pages, even if it is related to Council projects.' If you are unsure if a page is of a political nature, please contact communications@south-ayrshire.gov.uk**.'

- Page 9 - This sentence has been added as the final paragraph '**You should also ensure a link to the Council's [Report a Problem](#) page on the website is available at the top of your social media page.**'

- Page 14 – this is a new page called '**Following other channels and people**'
  Text added: '**You want people to follow your channel, and it's good practice that you follow any relevant accounts too.**

  It's important that you are careful of who you follow and regularly review who you are following.

  When following other social media channels, you should:

  - **Ensure the channel is relevant to your own account;**

  - **Make sure the channel cannot be viewed as political in any way, or associated with any political party;**

- **Never follow anyone who posts content of a political nature;**

- **Never follow any channel that could damage the Council's profile or reputation;**

- **Only follow reputable or recognised bodies or individuals;**

- **Not follow politicians;**

- **Never follow any employees of the Council.**

- Page 15 – final sentence changed to:
  '**Our social media accounts are monitored during business hours:**

  Monday - Thursday 8:45am - 4:45pm
  Friday 8:45am - 4:00pm'

A link to the amended version on the Communications page on The Core can be found below:

https://thecore.south-ayrshire.gov.uk/media/10937/Managing-Work-Related-Social-Media-Guidance-for-Employees/pdf/Managing_Work-related_social_media_guidance_for_employees_v7_-_updated_Jan_2024.pdf?m=1704989657823