

LGcommunications publications

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# Chief executives challenge report

LGcommunications research 2008

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# Introduction

## Background

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Endorsed by the LGA and IDeA, LGcommunications is a national body composed of local authorities working to raise standards in communications for local government. The objectives of LGcommunications are to promote best practice, to explore new innovations and drive excellence in local government communications.

LGcommunications are faced with a picture of declining informed ratings in local government. Between 2003/4 and 2006/7, the proportion of residents saying that they feel informed by their council has fallen from 51% to 42%.

The LGA are saying that local government communications is not delivering the expected improvements in corporate reputation, despite the advent of tools such as the Reputation Campaign and Connecting with Communities toolkit.

Equally, 'The Frontiers of Performance in Local Government 4' (MORI 2007) shows that the difference between resident satisfaction with services and resident satisfaction with councils remains significant. Just three local authorities have council satisfaction scores which are higher than their average service satisfaction scores.

MORI's regression analysis, in the same study, also shows that 'feeling informed' remains the single most significant attribute for predicting resident satisfaction with councils. The more informed people feel, the more satisfied they are with their council. MORI's research also identifies the importance of 'value for money' as a second highly predictive variable.

It is also important to recognise that this picture of satisfaction and communications takes place in an environment of increasing expectations from the public and stakeholders and that improving council reputations is a work in progress.

Two key challenges for communications and councils are to raise resident informed ratings and to close the gap between council and service satisfaction. Both these endeavours should improve council reputation levels and council satisfaction ratings.

## Objectives of the commission

LGcommunications has set up an independent commission following the government's white paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' to provide a practical analysis of how communications can best contribute to the reputation and success of councils.

### **The commission's objectives are:**

- to define the scope of what constitutes effective local government communications
- to describe how communications can become a more strategic tool in order to deliver the business plan of the council
- to identify the impact of communications on customer satisfaction (from voting patterns to formal research and BVPI scores)
- to identify what values drives a council's brand and the effect communications has on 'the brand'
- to define what excellent local government communications looks like and provide a framework for rating individual council communications departments
- to assess the current level of training and professional development and describe what skills practitioners need in order to move from communications technicians to strategists
- to critically appraise how authorities recruit, train and develop local government communicators.

## LGcommunications research

In order to deliver on the objectives, the Commission decided to undertake a programme of research to gain a much better understanding of what role communications was playing within councils. It is important to emphasise that this report is not meant to be a panacea to all these issues nor does it address all Commission's objectives. Instead, this Chief Executive Challenge report should be seen as an important contribution of evidence to the Commission.

Research undertaken by Karian and Box's 'LG07: Survey of Senior Communicators' already provided a strong source of evidence on the views of heads of communications. The key findings from this study were that most heads of communications are managing media channels: informing residents about the work of the council, dealing with the media, and managing publications. In the same study, 'channel managers' are juxtaposed with communicators as 'strategic advisors' who work as part of the senior management team, playing an active role in policy and decision-making in the authority, providing strategic counsel and guidance. Significantly, less than a third of senior communicators said that they played an active role in advising on policy.

Instead, the LGcommunications research would focus on why communicators were predominantly 'channel managers' and how communications could add much greater value to councils by operating more strategically. As such, it was essential to investigate the views of people at the top of the organisation and in the first instance to focus on chief executive perceptions. For comparability, a smaller number of leaders and heads of communications were also asked for their views.

# Methodology

**This research project is composed of two research elements: a survey of chief executives, leaders and heads of communications, and interviews with communication and consultation experts.**

## LG Communications survey

The Research Unit (TRU) used a semi-structured survey approach. This means that the survey contains quantitative scale questions like to what extent can the communication team influence the credit the council gets for the services it provides? And, also, qualitative questions like how could they improve the credit the council gets more the services it provides?

The reason for taking this approach is that LGcommunications are focussed both on looking for opportunities to improve communications performance as well as understanding the current state of the sector. Given these dual aims, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was appropriate.

The large majority of interviews were conducted by telephone. However, a small number were conducted face-to-face as part of site visits.

### **The sample structure of 50 chief executives was as follows:**

Counties	10 Chief Executives
Districts	10 Chief Executives
London Authorities	10 Chief Executives
Met Authorities	10 Chief Executives
Unitary Authorities	10 Chief Executives

The sample was also structured by government region and as much as possible by CPA rating to give a representative spread of chief executive opinion.

For comparison, TRU also conducted 10 leader interviews and 10 heads of communications interviews. These were included to see whether opinions differed between groups and whether there were differences in perceptions regarding how communications can be improved. The large majority of these supplementary interviews were conducted with councils where the chief executive had already been interviewed. In a small number of cases, interviews were held with deputy leaders and senior management team members acting as proxies.

## Expert evidence

The members of the Commission in seeking guidance on best practice and practical methods of improving communications have also conducted a series of interviews with experts in the field, which are also summarised within this report. These discussions took the form of depth interviews using a structured interview guide. This would enable comparisons to be made between the responses given by experts to particular issues.

## Interpretation of the data

This research project focuses on why communications is performing at the level it is and how it can be improved from the perspective of 50 chief executive interviews. However, this small sample does not mean that this research is without statistical rigour. The results do not provide any statistically robust information at a local authority type level i.e. at County councils or District council level. But if single tier and counties are taken as a group, the margin of error is about + 13%.

The findings for leaders and heads of communications do not have a robust statistical foundation. They provide valid qualitative content and indicative responses for the quantitative questions.

Where percentages in this report do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of "don't know" categories, or the opportunity for multiple answers to a question. Throughout the report, in text and charts, an asterisk (\*) denotes a value less than half a per cent.

# Executive Summary

The Chief Executives Challenge report for LGcommunications offers both evidence of significant challenges to and opportunities for the local government communications community. This research illustrates the willingness of chief executives and leaders to take part and discuss these issues as well as seeing communications as a vital part of what councils do today.

This research builds on the work undertaken by the LGA's Reputation Campaign and Karian and Box's Survey of Senior Communicators by examining how the role of communications functions are perceived by chief executives and leaders and how they think communications can add value to the council.

Equally, this report offers direction from leading opinion formers within the industry and asks the communications community to make some key decisions now about how the service should develop and improve.

## Five big challenges

1. Meeting the Chief Executive Challenge
2. Becoming business experts
3. Proving your worth
4. Getting skills for future leadership role
5. Delivering excellent communications

## Meeting the chief executive challenge

Chief executives and leaders tend to perceive heads of communications as 'channel managers', as informing residents about council services, dealing with media enquiries, managing publications and sometimes consultation and engagement as opposed to 'strategic advisors'. Though many report directly to chief executives, they are not usually part of the senior management team nor do they have an active role in policy and decision-making for the council.

Chief executives can be divided into three groups with regard to their views on the strategic role of communications. The first third of chief executives do not think it is the role of communications to be involved in service development and improvement, or that their heads of communications did not have the requisite skills, understanding of council business or capacity. The next third see the strategic input in terms of feedback for council services through consultation and engagement functions run by communications. The final third see communications as playing a full strategic role in terms of service development and engagement, and change management.

There is still a common perception within the leadership of councils that communications is narrowly focussed, dealing mostly with local media and building relationships with journalists.

However, encouragingly, most chief executives said that they wanted communications to become more strategic. As part of this, chief executives wanted communications to be more pro-active, gain a better understanding of services, work better with colleagues and become more politically adroit.

This offers a significant opportunity to communications experts. The door is open to professionals who can meet the Chief Executive Challenge. However, to take advantage of this heads of communications must understand the business imperatives for the council and its leadership.

Currently, chief executives and leaders do not see communications as a key influencer on the top table. Experts in the field suggest that senior communicators have to raise their game to have greater influence with the political and managerial leadership of their organisations.

Half the chief executives interviewed said that the impact of communications was often intangible for the key outcomes for the council. In most cases, the contribution of communications is usually accounted for within the perceptions of services or perceptions of the council. The Chief Executive Challenge will be for heads of communications systematically and demonstrably to prove the worth of communications and the impact on key outcomes for the council.

There is all too often insufficient evidence for the leadership to properly judge the value of communications. This has been a consistent failing of the industry over many years and is harming the development of local government communicators. The winners will be those that can prove their worth through meaningful evaluation and monitoring; those with the ability to turn reactive into pro-active and that can learn new skills in understanding business management and political nous.

Heads of communications should also build on internal communications and media relations successes to develop relationships both within and without the council. Partnership working offers further opportunities for communicators to develop a more strategic approach and to gain a greater experience of policy decision-making.

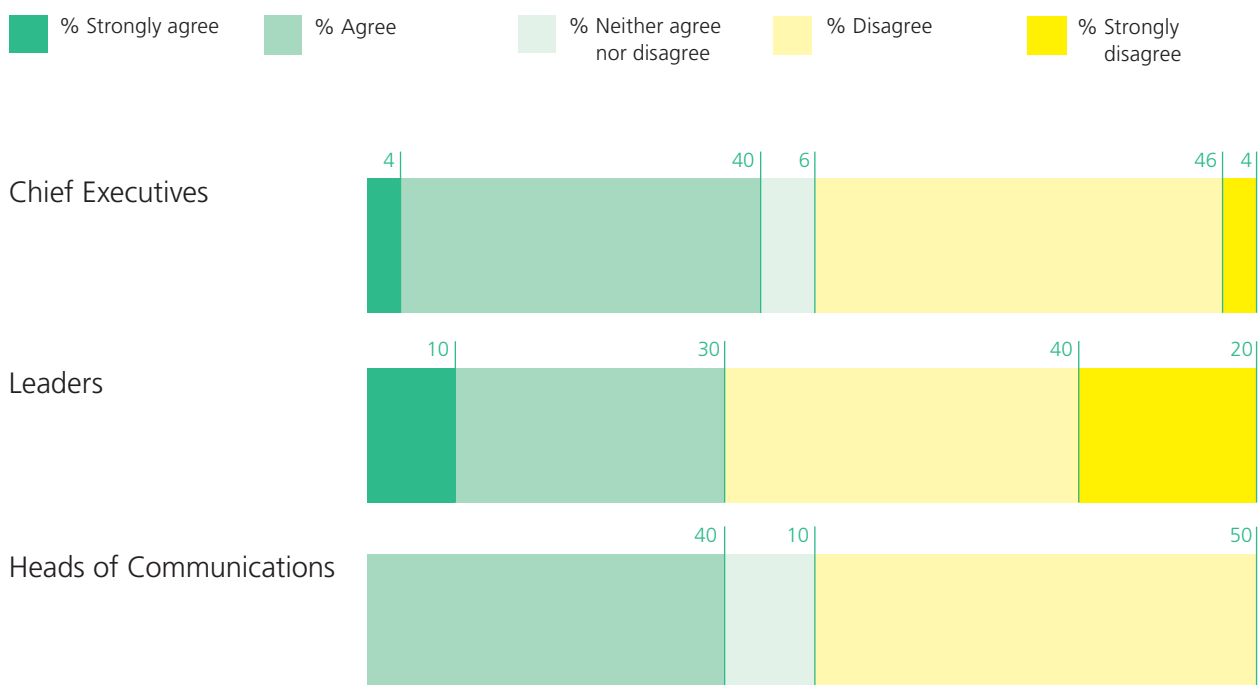
## Becoming business experts

Chief executives do not consider the head of communications to have as strategic a role as other chief officers. Roughly half of chief executives do not see the role of communications as one that shapes policy or service delivery.

In our small sample, in the majority of cases, heads of communications did not see themselves as having a strategic role in developing services.

### Strategic role

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the communication team plays a strategic role in developing council services?**



Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communications

Source: TRU

Heads of communications need to build credibility at the very apex of their organisations. There is some work to do to identify the key influencing skills that are required to improve but what is apparent from this research is a perceived lack of knowledge of how council business works. Chief executives are looking for heads of communications with political acumen and diplomatic skills. Experts also point to a need to improve credibility.

“Being able to see the bigger picture, reconciling conflicting objectives, ability to challenge, good communicators, being able to nuance, thinking about segmentation – different communications to different citizens e.g. different media releases tailored to different media, politically aware – understanding party politics.”

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**Jonathan Flowers, Veredus**

“Political nous (with a big and small ‘P’). Good strategic sense – matched with a clear focus on outcomes, there needs to be the blend of both otherwise too focused on strategy and not enough on delivery. Influencing skills, must have the attention of the ‘top table’.”

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**Carol Riches, Grant Riches**

However, this could be as difficult a task in the public sector as it is in the private.

“The profession needs to be taken seriously but the position has to be earned – no one has an automatic right to a seat at the top table. Only 14 top companies have marketing professional on the board – that’s how tough it is. Marketing professionals need to raise their game and evidence what they have contributed to the business plan. Need to get better at evaluation and measurement.”

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**Ray Jones, Chartered Institute of Marketing**

## Proving your worth

On balance, communications functions have not successfully provided a persuasive account of the impact of communications on services, or the importance of developing a council brand or marketing the council and its services. There is significant senior support for the work done on internal communications but insufficient evidence of how this is enhancing councils' reputations.

Significantly, the majority of chief executives say that the benefits of communications to council performance are often intangible. This perception has a number of different sources. Partly it arises because of the challenge of isolating communications contribution from other factors, partly it is due to the measures being used being too large, like changes in overall customer satisfaction, and finally, it is due to poor or non-existent evaluation and monitoring. The measures that are used are often outputs like press releases or media monitoring rather than specific key council messages or campaign recognition, or wider council outcomes.

"Anecdotal measures really. The monthly log of media interest. Customer satisfaction returns from front end services. Complaints and surveys using our citizens' panel."

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

"The only way is the number of press releases."

**Chief Executive, District Council**

This is a huge problem for local government communications. As we have seen leaders and chief executives are open to developing strategic communications. However, they are unsure of the worth that communications can bring in developing policy or services.

The only way to bridge this credibility gap will be for communicators to meet the challenges of rigorous evaluation and prove its worth to the business through solid intellectual processes.

About half the heads of communications we interviewed did not recognise this as an area of weakness. Local government communicators must get better at evaluation before they convince the council's leadership that they should be taken more seriously.

## Getting skills for future leadership role

Many chief executives are looking for heads of communications to have substantial political acumen, to be corporate and strategic players and have an understanding of key issues such as VFM, efficiency agenda and budget. Equally, chief executives also cite the fundamentals of good communications such as the need for good writing and media relations skills.

Improvements in credibility for local government communications functions will not take place unless these communications fundamentals are of a very high standard.

Experts also suggest that influencing skills may need improving.

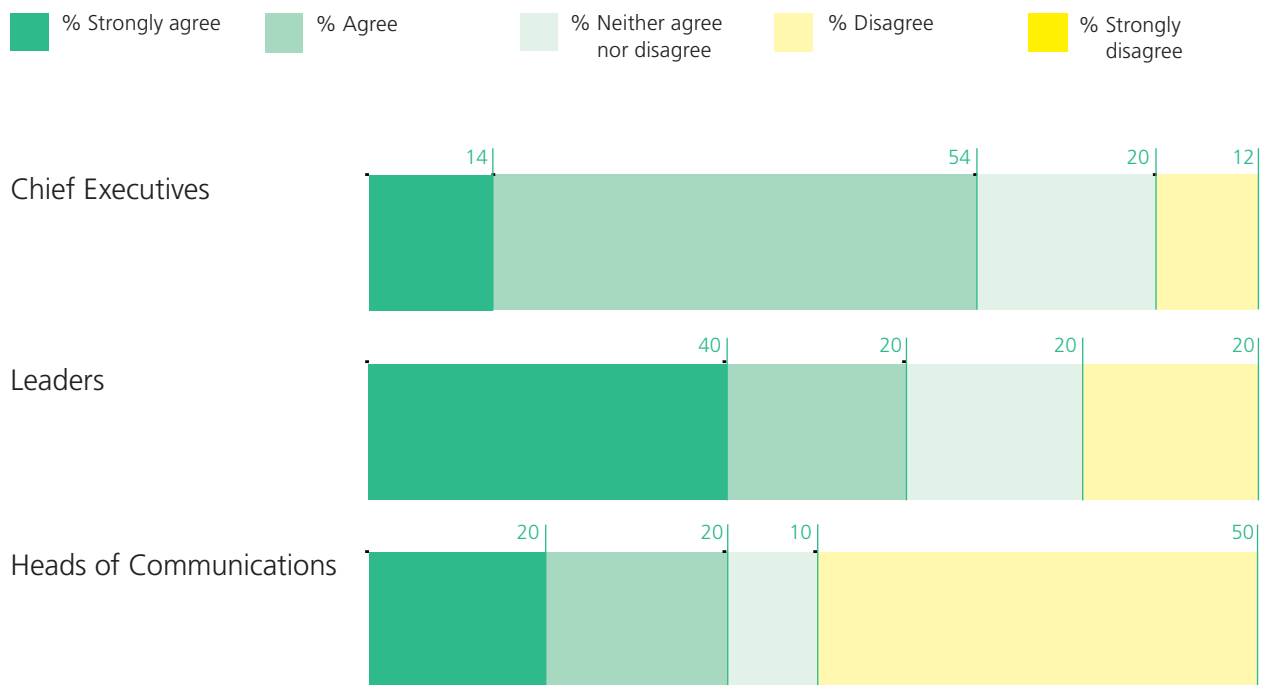
“People need to look at themselves. If they aren’t getting the influence they want then that may suggest that they don’t have the influencing skills. If people are good communicators but aren’t getting the influence or recognition from their chief executive or leader then they should change jobs.”

**Marina Pirotta, Tribal**

More than two-thirds of chief executives said that communications had a key role to play in the council’s relationships with partners and key stakeholders. This pattern is mirrored in the perceptions of leaders. Interestingly, half the heads of communications disagreed that they had a pivotal role here.

## Partners and stakeholders

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the communication team play a pivotal role in our relationship with our partners and key stakeholders?**



Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communications

Source: TRU

This is an area of concern for communicators as Local Strategic Partnerships, Local Area Agreements and the government's devolution agenda begin to become more dominant within local government. The competing demands of partner organisations and partnership communications themselves are important. It will become vital to organisations that their heads of communications have the right skills to be able to deal with and influence stakeholders and partners.

“In the next 12 months its going to be about the budget and efficiency. However, over the next 3-4 years, it would be about efficiency, place shaping and recruitment. [Communicators need to be dealing with] rising customer expectations, doing more for less and demonstrating value for money...The strategic role of the council as leaders of the locality, communications for the public services of the place, communications promoting the place as well as the council. Consultation and listening - the customer voice. Understanding the hard to reach e.g. businesses, people who are disengaged. Front-line staff need to know the organisation’s brand/values.”

**Jonathan Flowers, Veredus**

“There is lots of technical and professional training available but needs to be more on the political dimension and senior management level.”

**Carol Grant, Grant Riches**

“Training around stakeholder relationships and the more complex engagement techniques.”

**Rhion Jones, Consultation Institute**

## Delivering excellent communications

The hallmarks of excellent communications are seen as high and rising public satisfaction, pro-activity with the media and getting the councils key messages out to residents, stakeholders and the media. Chief executives also point to high staff satisfaction, good staff relations and working well, and having credibility, with other council services.

The winners will be those heads of communications who have learned how to make the function pro-active. Both chief executives and leaders cited a need for communications to become much more 'on the front foot'.

"Not as well organised as it could be and it's an easy area not to expand. They need to get back to promoting our services."

**Leader, Unitary Council**

"Need to be more pro-active than they are – react to press comment."

**Deputy Leader, County Council**

"Awareness of the democratic role of members. Get into national media more strongly. Needs more consistent messages, needs to get more authority."

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

"Strategic planning of communications. More pro-active."

**Chief Executive, County Council**

In terms of the impact of the LGA Reputation Campaign, chief executives are most likely to focus on the improvements arising from streetscene services and pro-active media relations. Likewise, leaders concentrate on media relations, and to a lesser extent, on branding.

Council brand tends to be seen in terms of badging services and corporate identity. The idea of council brand values is not clearly articulated and perceptions of key council messages are often untested. The strength of the LGA Reputation Campaign lies in delivering on branding, communications and engagement as well as services. Consequently, the power of the campaign is diminished if communications have not persuaded the political and managerial leadership of the merits of its full application.

## Key recommendations for heads of communications

- **Be pro-active and strategic.** Both the political and managerial leadership would like more initiative from communications.
- **Build stronger relationships** with service departments and connect with the front-line. Reinforce the positives that arise from successful internal communications.
- **Systematically evaluate the impact of communications.** This is an essential part of moving away from channel-managing, reactive, tactical communications.
- **Promote the council and get the council's key messages out.** Engage with the community. Show how marketing communications can contribute to the council as well as media relations.
- **Branding is still a big challenge** and the new focus on place provides opportunities to re-appraise this.
- **More training.** Communicators need to improve their strategic understanding, their influencing skills at the political and managerial leadership level of the organisation, their understanding of local government, and their management skills.

## Where to next?

The LGcommunications Commission will continue its research work to shed light on the direction that communications in the sector should take.

### The LGcommunications Commission suggests the following course of action in response to this report:

- **Excellent communications.** These research findings will form the basis of LGcommunications work for the next 12 to 18 months. We will create a baseline for what constitutes excellent local government communications at district, county and unitary level as well as defining the strategic scope of local government communications.
- **Training and development of senior communicators.** LGcommunications will be developing a training arena for senior communicators, focussing on high-level managerial skills as well as professional communications skills, to better equip them for the 'top table'.
- **Partnership working.** With the LGA and IDeA, we will work on developing the LGA Reputation Campaign and Connecting with Communities toolkit.
- **Peer review of communications functions.** We will work to develop a model of peer monitoring and evaluation of communications functions to inform chief executives and leaders about the contribution excellent communications can make to their council.
- **Place-shaping agenda.** We will define and develop the communications remit within the place-shaping agenda and provide training and development to support this.

# Key Issues

Overwhelmingly, chief executives identify the efficiency agenda and budgetary constraints as the key issues facing them over the next year. Chief executives also identify the major projects and set pieces, the role of new area arrangements and the partnerships arising from them.

“The overall budgetary position and the efficiency agenda. We are also regenerating the town centre and have to focus on our own reputational management now that we are a four star authority.”

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

“Joint working is going to be really important for us: working with districts, local health services and the police.”

**Chief Executive, County Council**

“We are being challenged financially. Elections in May could change the political balance and planning and the local development framework as we are a growth point.”

**Chief Executive, District Council**

Another issue is improving customer satisfaction and customer care.

“Continuous improvement. Enhancing reputation. Delivering improvements that the public recognise. Visible change.”

**Chief Executive, London Council**

Chief executives see challenges within their organisations as well, ranging from Single Status to service improvement to the transition to unitary status.

“Focussing on value for money, preparing for CPA, place shaping, improving our children’s services.”

**Chief Executive, Unitary Council**

“Implement Single Status. Implement restructure. Place-shaping and performance management.”

**Chief Executive, District Council**

## Chief executive priorities

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the communication team play a pivotal role in our relationship with our partners and key stakeholders?**



Base: 50 chief executives

Source: TRU

The findings from heads of communications and leaders are more indicative than the chief executive results. With the head of communications, there is considerable overlap in the responses with most pointing to business transformation, efficiency savings, major projects and increased customer satisfaction. The key difference is that the efficiency saving and value for money messages do not come across as strongly. Heads of communications need to think harder about how they can contribute to these key issues.

“Diverse communities. Building schools for the future. Regeneration issues.”

**Head of Communications, Metropolitan Council**

“Local boundaries review. New swimming pool. Office refurbishment.”

**Head of Communications, District Council**

In our small sample, leaders were even more likely to spontaneously identify budget constraints than chief executives and similarly focussed on major projects and service improvement. Another area on the radar for leaders is sustainability. This did not feature strongly in the views expressed by chief executives.

“Council re-organisation. Money is very limited and adult social care is under pressure. It’s not just about more money but also finding smarter ways to do things.”

**Leader, County Council**

“More with less. Better, more robust partnership. Concessionary fares.”

**Leader, District Council**

“Equal pay. Council grant settlement. Sustainability.”

**Leader, Metropolitan Council**

There is unanimous agreement that whatever the issues for the council communications has a critical role in dealing with them. However, there is an interesting difference between how the council leadership and heads of communications described this role.

Leaders and chief executives are much more likely to frame the contribution of communications in terms of words like ‘message’ and ‘media’. This tendency is not universal but significant.

In contrast, heads of communications are more likely to describe what they are doing in terms of communicating with target groups like stakeholders or the public.

“[Communication’s] objective is to promote the reputation and services of the council. Managed well it maximises the resources of the council...it provides messages going out to the communities to counter local media.”

**Chief Executive, London Council**

“Crucial. How we get the message out to the public is essential.”

**Leader, Metropolitan Council**

“Absolutely key. The relationship I have with the local editor and the briefings supplied by our communications people. How we get the message out to the public is essential.”

**Leader, District Council**

“Central, absolutely vital for staff, stakeholders and residents.”

**Head of Communications, County Council**

“Communications helps influence stakeholders and the public. Supports community engagement and helps staff understand what is happening.”

**Head of Communications, Unitary Council**

# Council reputation

In looking at council reputation, LGcommunications wanted to examine what councils were doing to build their corporate reputations and to pick up on the disparity observed by MORI between average service satisfaction and council satisfaction. In response to the challenges of council satisfaction and reputation, chief executives were most likely to say that more engagement with the public and more research were required. Many said that they needed a better understanding of what is driving customer perceptions of the council and an assessment of how well promoting key council messages is contributing to reputation. The council magazine is also seen as a key channel for promoting the council reputation. Disappointingly, only about a fifth of chief executives spontaneously identified the LGA's Reputation Campaign.

In discussing council reputation with chief executives, this is an area of substantial debate. There is no an obvious consensus amongst chief executives about what creates the disparity between the service satisfaction levels and council satisfaction levels. The majority of chief executives did not spontaneously point out linking the council brand to services or the importance of staff as ambassadors as suggested in the LGA Reputation Campaign.

Some chief executives focussed almost exclusively on service improvement:

"The Reputation Campaign says focus on streetscene."

**Chief Executive, District Council**

"High quality services is fundamental. If not it's like sticking lipstick on a pig."

**Chief Executive, London Council**

A larger group of chief executives stressed re-connecting services with the council, with a small number mentioning brand and corporate identity:

"Council associated with negatives like council tax. Play up the corporate improvement of the service. They improve because they are part of the corporate world."

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

"Proper campaigns about key priorities on a manifesto based on views of the public. Internal and external survey work. Re-branding. Improving the website."

**Chief Executive, London Council**

"Focus on front line services that make a difference like adoption or domestic violence. Go out to the parishes and make that investment through building up those relationships that way it's sustainable. Lots of local intervention."

**Chief Executive, County Council**

Some chief executives said they were providing opportunities for feedback from the public or investing in communications:

“A lot of information in conjunction with local partners, with the public and staff. Trying to ensure the public can communicate with us. What do you think? How could we do things better?”

**Chief Executive, County Council**

“Pro-active communications to protect the reputation of the council.”

**Chief Executive, District Council**

Others said that a disconnect between service satisfaction and council satisfaction is a reality that cannot be avoided or is not worth worrying about:

“Simplified key corporate messages. Centralised communications. Stop worrying about how the council is perceived.”

**Chief Executive, London Council**

“The public divorces the things it likes from the general media hostility to local government. No point pretending, we concentrate on doing things as well as we can. We reflected on our survey results. One bad case in local government and we all get tarred with the same brush.”

**Chief Executive, London Council**

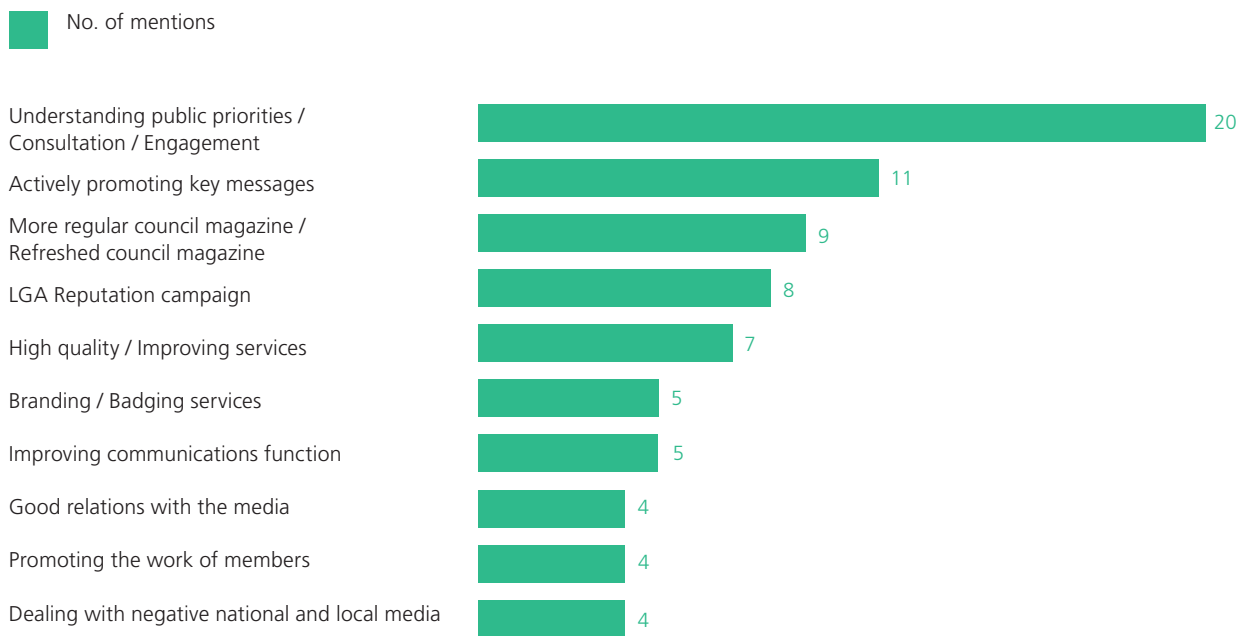
Finally there were those that disregard the research:

“What does satisfaction with the council mean? Not sure it really means anything to the public...What is the point in marketing services? The public know when services are good and when services are poor... Reputation-wise communications is not that significant. Instead, use better kinds of social networking, create two-way communication, social networking. Build reputation through innovating and leading the debate...Everyone should be fighting for the best for the council.”

**Chief Executive, London Council**

## Council reputation

**Question: What is your council specifically doing to build and protect the corporate reputation of the council?**



Base: 50 chief executives

Source: TRU

Leaders again focussed on the importance of getting the messages out, dealing with negative media and ensuring that council services were properly branded.

“More attention to the branding of the council. How people perceive us? Be more pro-active and improve ratings.”

**Deputy Leader, County Council**

“Clear branding reinforcing branding guidelines. Don’t think of them as being linked to things like schools and libraries. New leisure contracts, bins, lorries... aware this is a problem? And contractor communications.”

**Leader, London Council**

“Newsletter, the municipal paper. Making sure we badge services and that the service is personal. Build links with local newspapers. Get across the council is the most important place-shaper. We are struggling with a cynical media.”

**Leader, Unitary Council**

Positively, heads of communications pointed out details of the LGA Reputation Campaign. Heads of communications tended to stress the importance of media relations, branding and improving services. Again, there was limited mention of the role staff play in improving reputation.

“Developing and living a brand. We don’t have a brand. That needs to be backed up by a different way of doing things. Hard to get reputation up when key services are failing.”

**Head of Communications, County Council**

“We are signed up to the LGA Reputation Campaign and are investing more in communications. A change in political leadership has meant that members are much more interested in communications.”

**Head of Communications, Unitary Council**

“Internal communications runs through everything we do. Staff are extremely happy to work here. On media relations we are a bit on the back foot and need to improve.”

**Head of Communications, District Council**

“We have a new corporate identity and we are branding things up. We are also using a campaign ‘You said. We did.’ This lets the public know how we are responding to their feedback.”

**Head of Communications, Metropolitan Council**

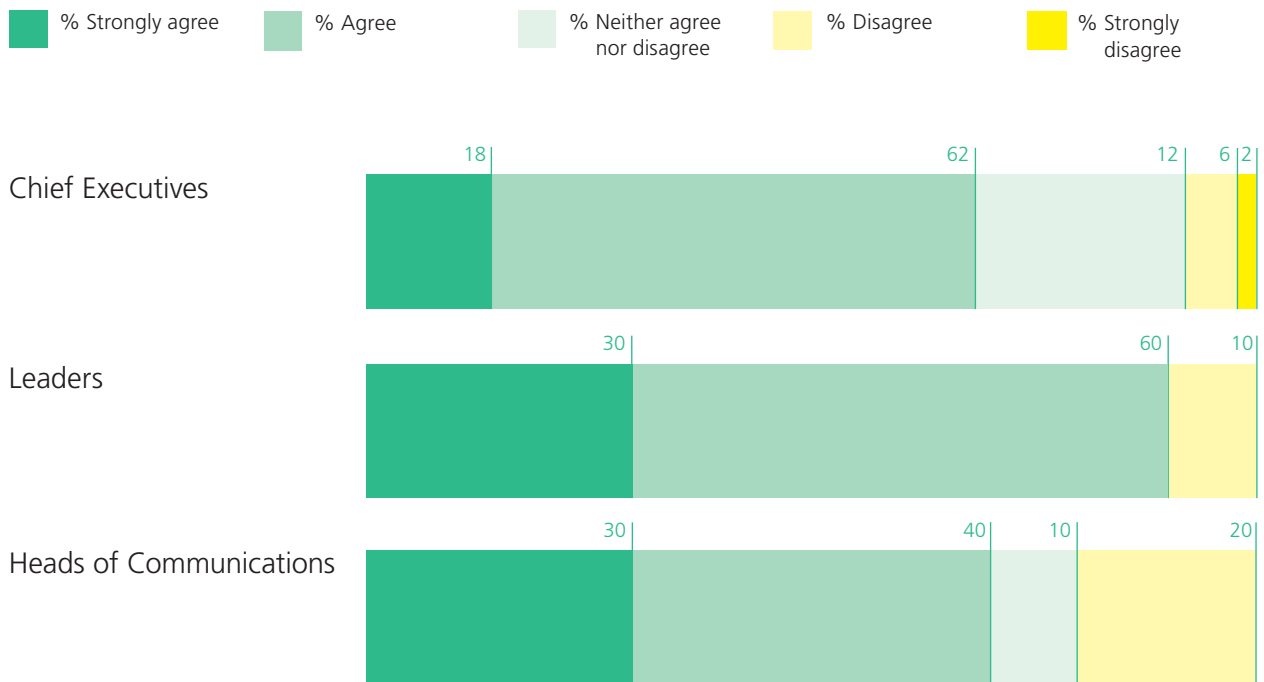
“One council. Common branding. We also need to think about partnership branding. It is important to set out our logos with the police and health rather than dilute our brand by creating a new identity that no one knows. There is also a reputational deficit for members which we are trying to bridge.”

**Head of Communications, London Council**

Respondents were also asked about their perceptions of communications in terms of managing the reputation of the council. A large majority of respondents said that they felt communications had a role in this. However, some pointed to this being a key responsibility for the leader and cabinet and the senior managerial team. Others said that it was everyone's responsibility.

## Council reputation

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the communication team manages the reputation of the council?**



Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communications

Source: TRU

# Strengths and weaknesses

Chief executives tend to identify strong media relations, pro-activity, creativity and good relations with the journalists and other key contacts as the strengths of their communications function.

“The key result is that public satisfaction is increasing. They communicate well with the media and the public. They are very pro-active and see problems coming.”

**Chief Executive, District Council**

“Very responsive. Ability to be very local managing the press end. Strategic in designing campaigns. Good political acumen. Good relations with the media and they are very creative.”

**Chief Executive, Unitary Council**

“Good at dealing with the press and the media. Ability to work under pressure”

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

“Well-informed about what the council is doing. Wide range of skills. Thoughtful about the different ways to communicate with different audiences.”

**Chief Executive, London Council**

“Exceptionally strong reactive media. Supporting front-line initiatives. Strong on internal communications.”

**Chief Executive, County Council**

Fewer chief executives point to the strategic role communications can play.

“Ability to think strategically on the major campaigns which shift public perceptions. They are on the front foot, are robust and resilient.”

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

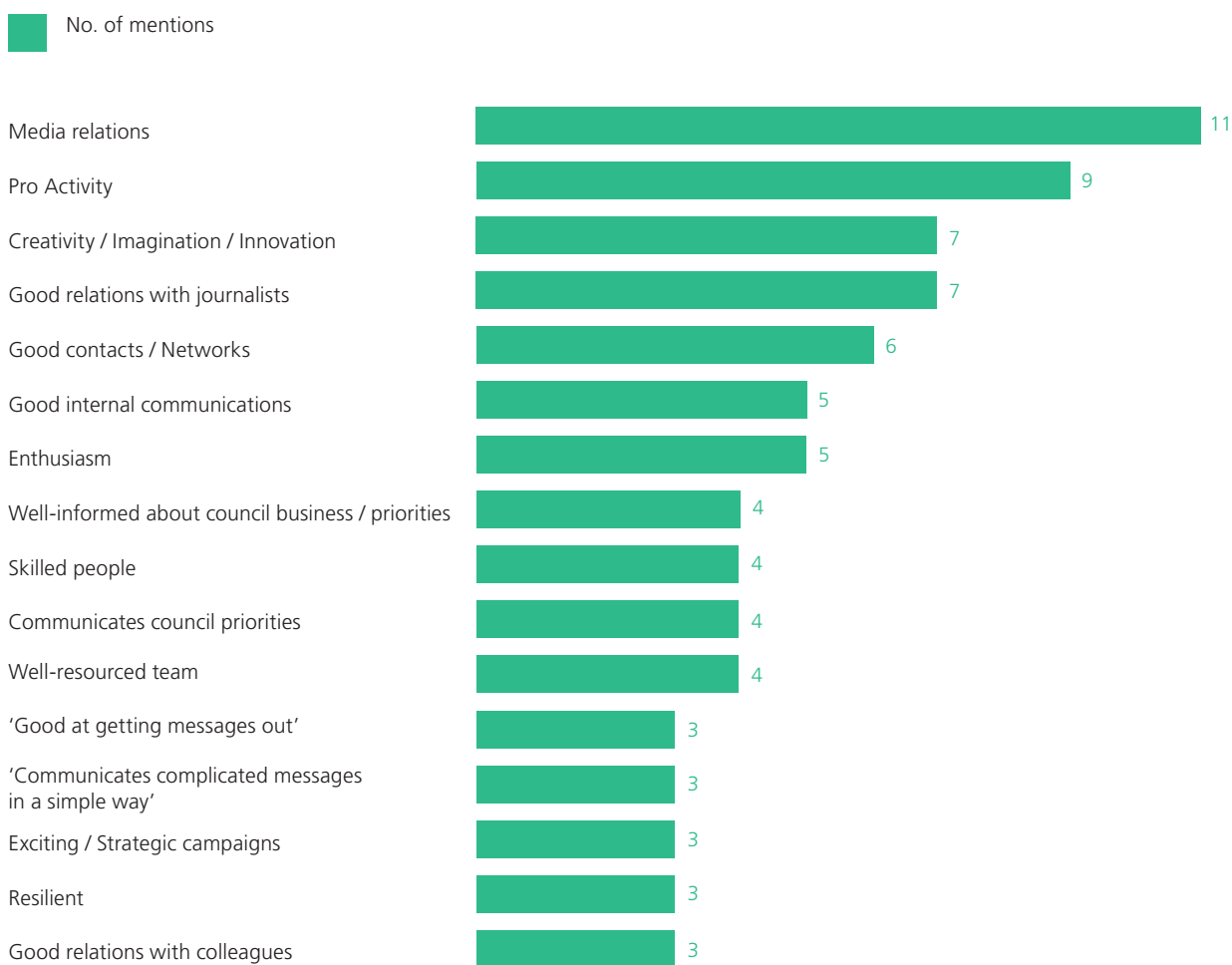
“At the heart of the organisation’s vision. At the heart of the organisation’s information. At the heart of the organisation’s consultation.”

**Chief Executive, London Council**

Leaders, like chief executives, focus on media relations. They also point to the professionalism and credibility of communications officers as well as their positive working relations with members. Despite the LGA Reputation Campaign, heads of communications are more inward looking; tending to identify having a strong, skilled team with creativity and good writing skills.

## Communications team strengths

**Question: What two or three things do you consider to be the strengths of your Communications team?**



Base: 50 chief executives

Source: TRU

Where chief executives did identify failings it tended to be around a lack of pro-activity on the part of the communications function. This was often couched in terms of not sufficiently getting the council's key messages across in the local media. A smaller number of chief executives were also concerned about the political skills of the communications team, the effect of uncoordinated communications on the clarity of the council's key messages, and the level of forward planning. Chief executives were also interested in the greater involvement of services in communications, whether this was in understanding the importance of brand and communications, developing communications campaigns or media responses.

“Awareness of the democratic role of members. Get into national media more strongly. Needs more consistent messages, needs to get more authority.”

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

“Understand the messages better. Better dialogue with service leads.”

**Chief Executive, District Council**

“Strategic planning of communications. More pro-active.”

**Chief Executive, County Council**

“Communications currently split across directorates. We need to improve the commonality of message and have a better communication plan and campaigns.”

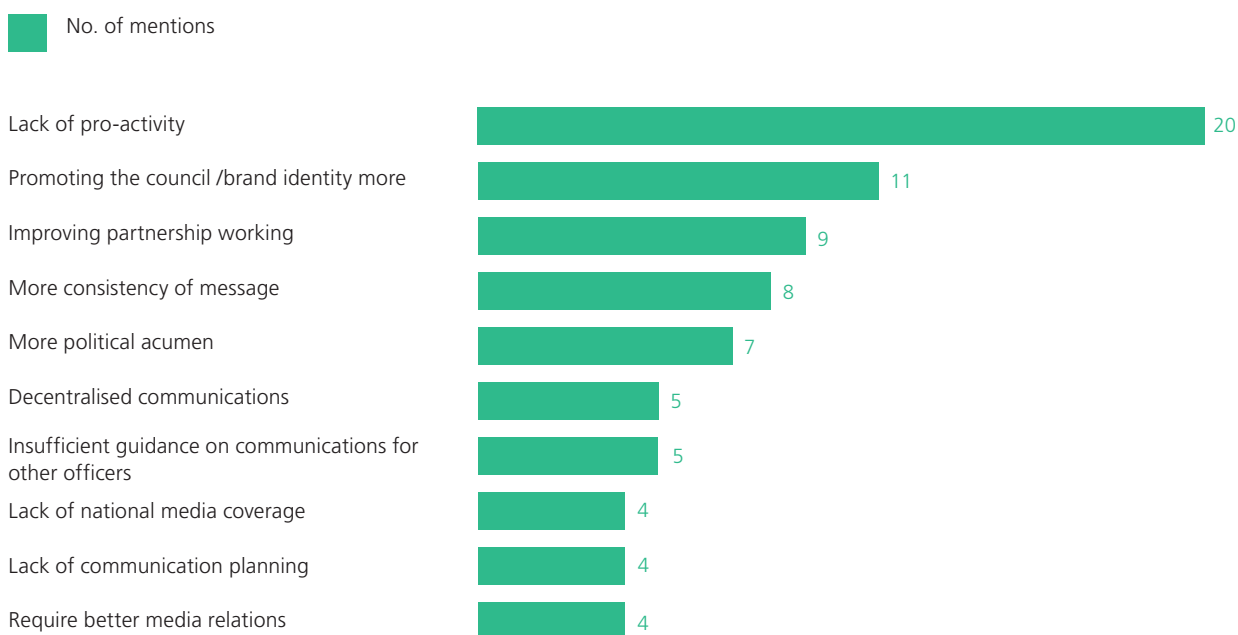
**Deputy Chief Executive, London Council**

“Helping to raise skills levels in the authority on communications. Raising understanding of how to get a good brand.”

**Chief Executive, Unitary Council**

## Communications team weaknesses

**Question: What two or three things do you consider to be the weaknesses of your communications team?**



Base: 50 chief executives

Source: TRU

The leaders were the group most likely to want communications to be pro-active in promoting the council and its services.

“Not as well-organised as it could be and it’s an easy area not to expand. They need to get back to promoting our services.”

**Leader, Unitary Council**

“Need to be more pro-active than they are – react to press comment.”

**Deputy Leader, County Council**

Heads of communications agreed with chief executives and leaders that they needed more pro-activity.

“More linking up of what we do so there is clear planning. More effective media management and more scope for creativity.”

**Head of Communications, Unitary Council**

“Not cost-effective enough with significant skills gaps. We need to improve internal communications have more pro-active press and media and more managed campaigns.”

**Head of Communications, Metropolitan Council**

“We need to be more pro-active and better at upward challenge in the organisation. A better communications plan will help us with this. The web site also needs to be improved.”

**Head of Communications, District Council**

“We could be better at spotting integrating chances and getting the media team, marcomms and web team to join up together more. There needs to be better advanced planning, campaign planning.”

**Head of Communications, County Council**

“More proper evaluation. More internal communications as staff are our most important advocates. We would like to demonstrate better value for money and we still feel a way from where we would want to be around issues like fear of crime.”

**Head of Communications, London Council**

# Strategic role of communications

The Karian and Box research 'LG07 Study 2007' suggested that there is an important dichotomy in the communications functions of local government between 'channel managers' and 'strategic advisors'. The LGcommunications survey asked a number of connected questions about the strategic role of communications within local government.

First of all, participants in the survey were asked to describe the extent to which the communications team play a role in the development and improvement of council services. To summarise, chief executive perceptions on the strategic role of communications can be roughly divided into thirds. The first group do not see communications as having much of a strategic role at all or see it simply as 'communicating the services'. The second group see the contribution of communications as an outcome of consultation and engagement functions providing vital feedback. This group also identify the role communications has in informing the public and stakeholders about services. Only the final group see a fully strategic role for communications. This group of chief executives identify strategic involvement in strategic overview, service development and change management.

This mirrors the picture found in the Karian and Box study where only one third of heads of communications could be identified as 'strategic advisors'. However, our research suggests a further split amongst channel managers. Channel managers with consultation functions are more empowered than those without and we would suggest are a step closer to developing wider strategic responsibilities.

In more detail, the first group of chief executives said that communications does not have a significant involvement in the development and improvement of council services. This perception is not confined to any type of local authority but can be found across the piece.

"It isn't directly involved in improvement - the role of communications is to communicate."

**Chief Executive, District Council**

"They play a supportive role."

**Chief Executive, London Council**

"Consultation crucial but communications is separate to that and their involvement is relatively low."

**Chief Executive, Unitary Council**

The most common response identified by these chief executives was that the strategic contribution of communications was 'communicating the services'.

"Key role for the policy team. Communications come in at the end."

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

"No - only in communicating results."

**Chief Executive, District Council**

A significant proportion of council communications functions include the council's consultation and engagement functions. The second group of chief executives consequently identify the consultation function rather than the communications function as playing an important role in service development and improvement.

"Heavily involved with the collection, collation and analysis of customer feedback. They also network with partners and others."

**Chief Executive, Unitary Council**

"Research is the way they contribute. It is not their role to develop and improve services."

**Chief Executive, London Council**

"More limited but would like to move on to more engagement than communications."

**Chief Executive, District Council**

The third group of chief executives often identify the internal communications function as having a key role in business transformation. Our analysis suggests that just over a third of chief executives see communications as providing a strategic contribution to service development and improvement.

"They articulate, they get involved in streetscene and liveability and the quality of the built environment. They work with service teams across [the county]."

**Chief Executive, District Council**

“Very strong here. We’ve seen the transformation communications brings. We bring them in early on every major initiative.”

**Chief Executive, County Council**

“Fundamental. The communications team lead on customer satisfaction and customer care. They feedback on key areas for service improvement, helping services to recognise where there are low service performances.”

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

“Doesn’t have a lot to contribute to development but a lot around improvement. It is the conduit between what the public think and what we are doing. There have been big communications campaigns that have changed behaviour like recycling.”

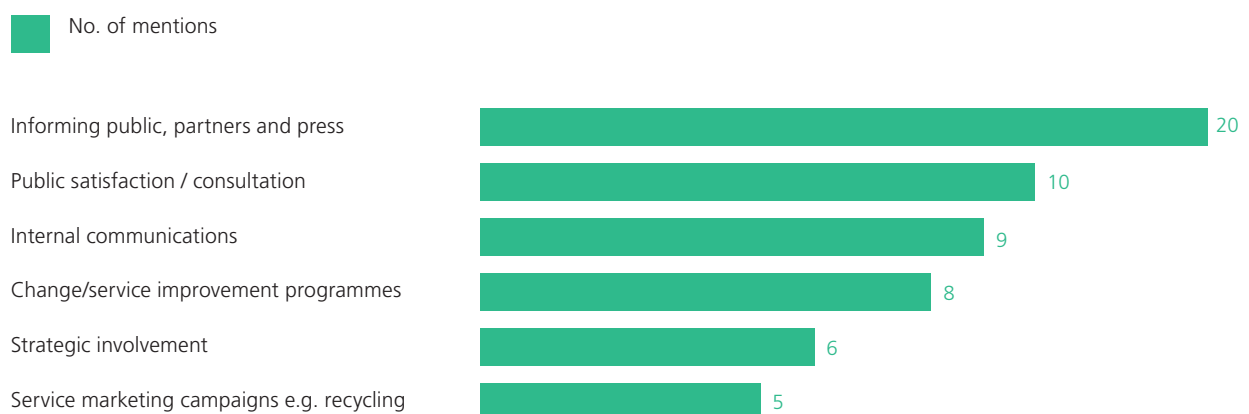
**Chief Executive, London Council**

“The head of communications sits on the wider managers group and he advises the leader and myself. I bring them in at the outset of big issues like congestion, recycling and climate change.”

**Chief Executive, Unitary Council**

## Service development and improvement

**Question: What role do communications play in the development and improvement of council services?**



Base: 50 chief executives

Source: TRU

Leaders had a similar range of views to chief executives.

“Communications doesn’t develop or improve council services; it’s after the event. It’s a bolt-on.”

**Leader, London Council**

“Only insofar as it feeds back to lead members and heads of department.”

**Leader, District Council**

“Does not participate in improvement, communicates to a wider audience and undertakes consultation with partners and resident.”

**Leader, Metropolitan Council**

“Integral part of it – involved in our [customer care programme] and frontline services, our call centre. Advising on the image of the council – how we are seen. Not directing changes but communicating them.”

**Leader, County Council**

“Consultation – feedback and informing the council, bringing back the intelligence. The community forums are also useful.”

**Leader, Unitary Council**

The heads of communications we spoke to were relatively upbeat about their involvement in the development and improvement of services.

“I report to the chief executive, attend all the [senior management team] meetings and help shape things.”

**Head of Communications, Metropolitan Council**

“Involved in a lot of strategies and input into how they are communicated. Involved in strategy and planning and the transformational agenda.”

**Head of Communications, District Council**

However, some saw their position differently.

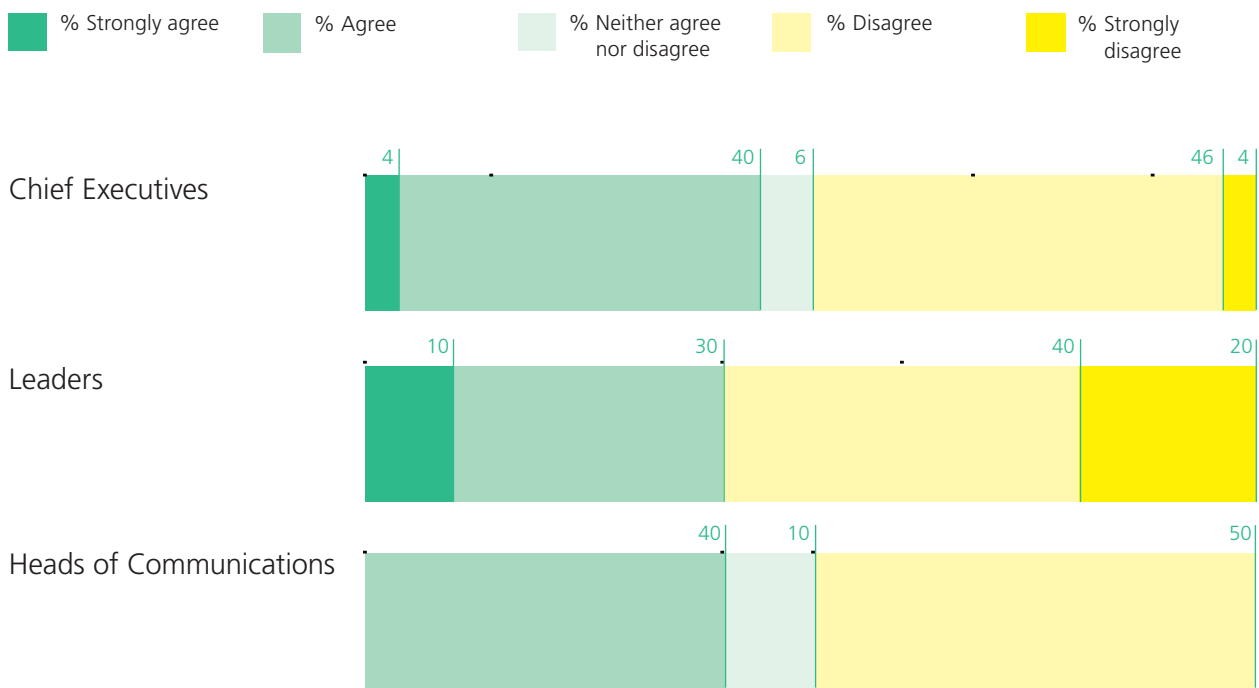
“We make a limited contribution. Some co-production for recycling and growing awareness but communications is not seen as a strategic function, which I think is an error. Instead, it is seen as asking the awkward questions because communications is audience focussed.”

**Head of Communications, London Council**

As well as eliciting respondents’ spontaneous reactions, chief executives, leaders and heads of communications were asked the extent to which they felt that communications had a strategic role in the council. Opinion was split right down the middle in all three groups.

## Strategic role

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the communication team plays a strategic role in developing council services?**



Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communications

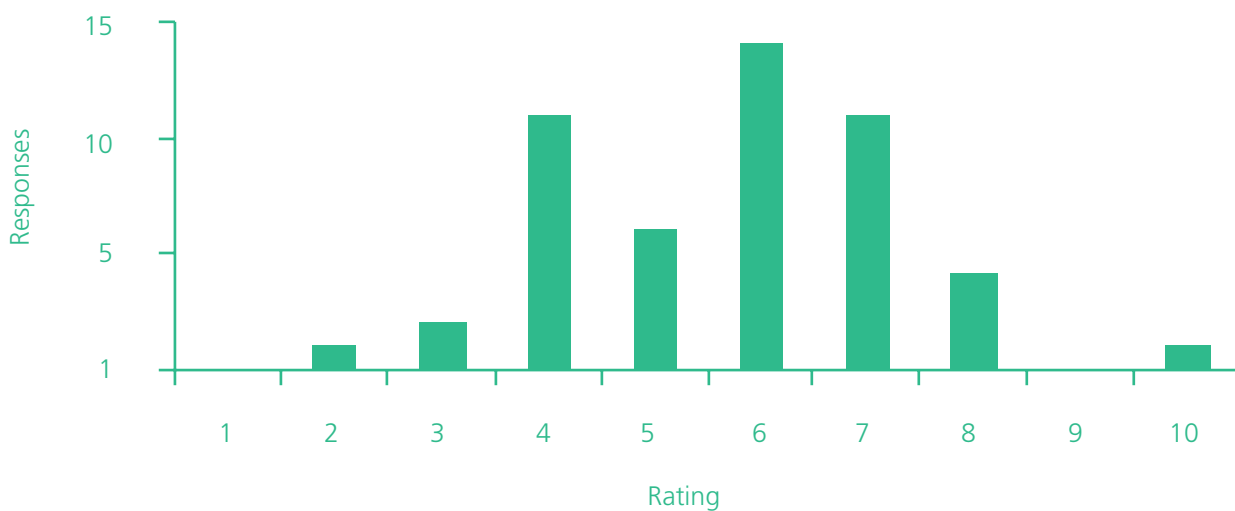
Source: TRU

Similarly, chief executives were asked to suggest where they felt the balance lay between strategic direction and providing media relations. The majority (60%) perceived the role of communications predominantly as providing media relations, as channel managers.

However, when asked whether they wanted to see any change in this balance over a third (36%) wanted communications to have greater role in strategic direction. No chief executive wanted their communication function to be less strategic. This said, opinion was divided on how strategic communications should become, with some wanting much more strategic focus and others looking for a middling position on our scale.

## Strategic direction v media relations

**Question: On a scale of one to ten, where one is providing strategic direction for the council and where ten is providing media relations for the council, where would you place your communications team?**



Base: 50 chief executives

Source: TRU

A number of reasons are given for communications not being more strategic ranging from it not being their role, to not having the requisite skills or capacity.

“One person - responding to press releases and creating our newsletter. I find it difficult to see how they could get involved more strategically.”

**Chief Executive, District Council**

“It is not their role. Vision is set politically, ambition managerially.”

**Chief Executive, London Council**

“They do not have the core skills to be involved in the strategic direction of the council.”

**Chief Executive, County Council**

# Hallmarks of excellent council communications

The chief hallmarks of excellent communications are seen as high and rising public satisfaction, pro-activity with the media and getting the councils key messages out to residents, stakeholders and the media. Chief executives also point to high staff satisfaction, good staff relations and working well and having credibility with other council services.

“24 carat integrity in the message. Clarity in the use of language. Need to have the authority to flex muscles to look after the brand.”

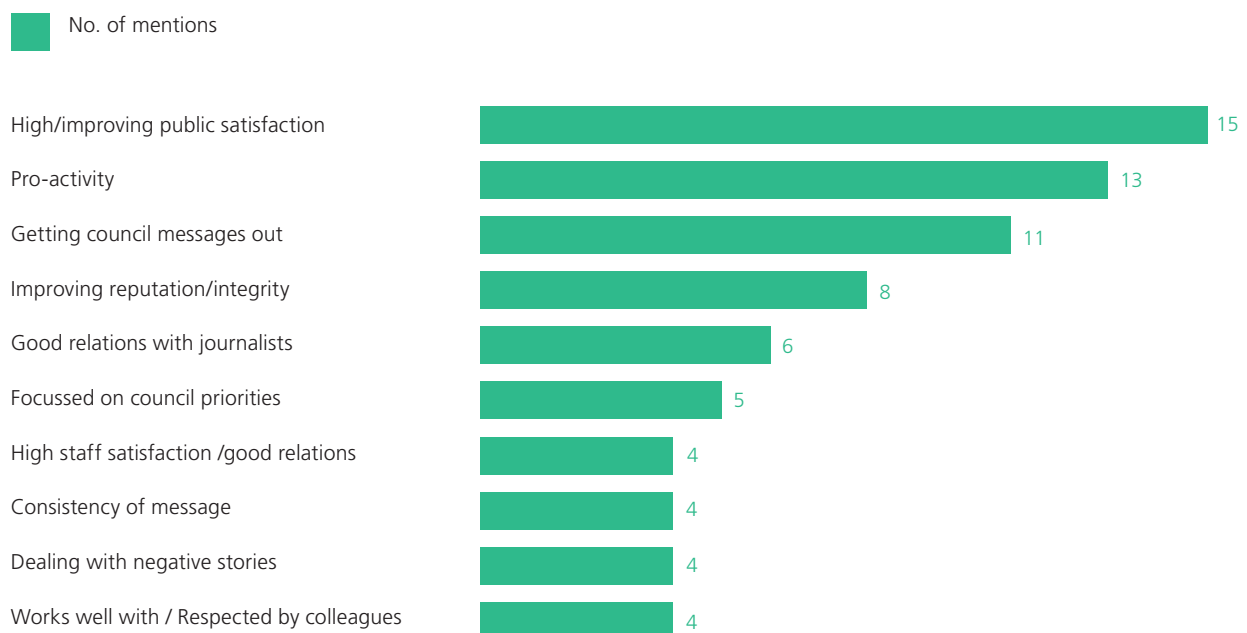
**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

“High citizen satisfaction. High staff satisfaction. Members and officers seeing communications as integral and inconceivable to be without them.”

**Chief Executive, County Council**

## Hallmarks of excellent communications

**Question: What do you think are the hallmarks of an excellent council communications functions?**



Base: 50 chief executives

Source: TRU

Leaders concurred. They identify pro-activity, high public satisfaction, getting the public engaged with the council key priorities and branding.

“Get out what the council is trying to achieve and what is being achieved. Prevent local media from damaging this.”

**Leader, London Council**

“Satisfied public. We go to a lot of effort to find out what people think about us. As a councillor it’s the sort of messages I hear when I am out on my business.”

**Leader, District Council**

The messages from heads of communications are more process focussed and less strategic. This group were much more likely to identify working well with services and being credible to colleagues. However, they did also identify pro-activity, public satisfaction, effective evaluation and public engagement.

“It is about building those conversations that dialogue between the council and the residents...we need to be doing more face to face communications.”

**Head of Communications, London Council**

“Communications at the heart of everything we do. A communications officer on SMT. Things aren’t just dropped on you so you can be pro-active.”

**Head of Communications, District Council**

“Improving resident satisfaction. Communicating with staff and improving our response times to the media.”

**Head of Communications, Metropolitan Council**

“Being trusted as a reliable source by councillors, staff and the press and linked up with strategic priorities. Showing to local people and stakeholders what’s in it for them. Access is important. Not being afraid to say things that are unpopular. Good practical skills and keeping up with new technology.”

**Head of Communications, Unitary Council**

“Promoting a high quality communications function for the public and for staff. A scientific underpinning to what we do. Does it fit with [the corporate priorities?]. Does it measure what’s going on? Monitoring and evaluation and staying in touch with communities.”

**Head of Communications, County Council**

# Council recognition

Six in ten chief executives said that the council gained credit for the services it provided. However, a third did not feel this was the case with many pointing to confusion amongst the public over who provided which services. Positively, there was almost universal agreement that the communication team could influence the credit the council gets for its services. Leaders and heads of communication held similar views.

“Gets its message across locally and nationally. They can directly point to work which has enhanced our reputation, and there are good relations with staff.”

**Chief Executive, London Council**

“Unless you manage the negative stuff the 0.01% horror stories, these shape opinion of those not using the service. You need to make the public aware of the services and engaged them in the improvements.”

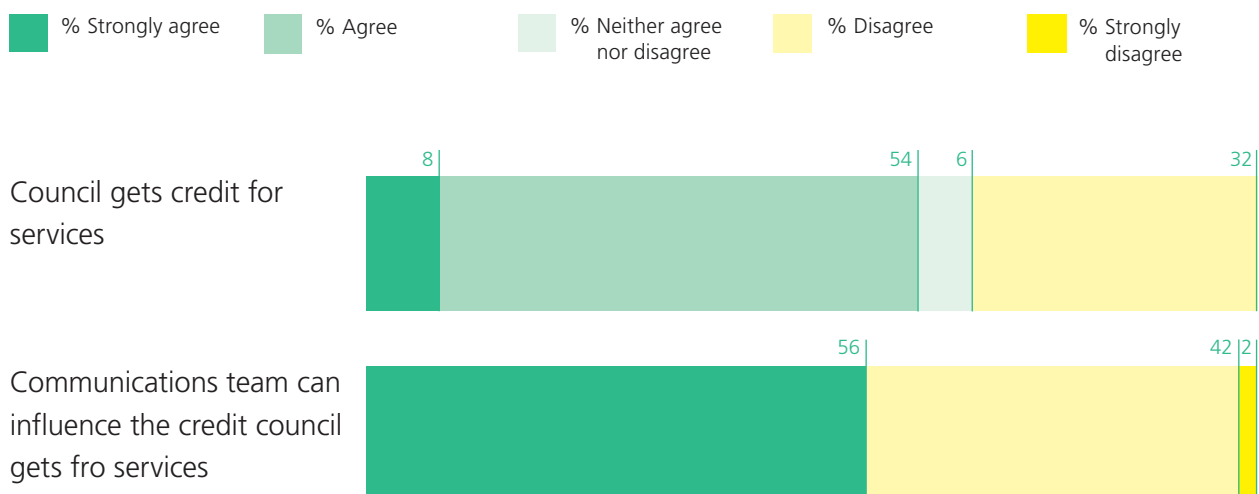
**Head of Communications, London Council**

In terms of improving the credit the council gets for the services it provides, chief executives said that communications, in some cases, needed to be more pro-active, deal with negative media and improving council branding.

## Councils getting the credit

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the council get credit for the services it provides?**

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the communications team can influence the credit the council gets for the service it provides?**



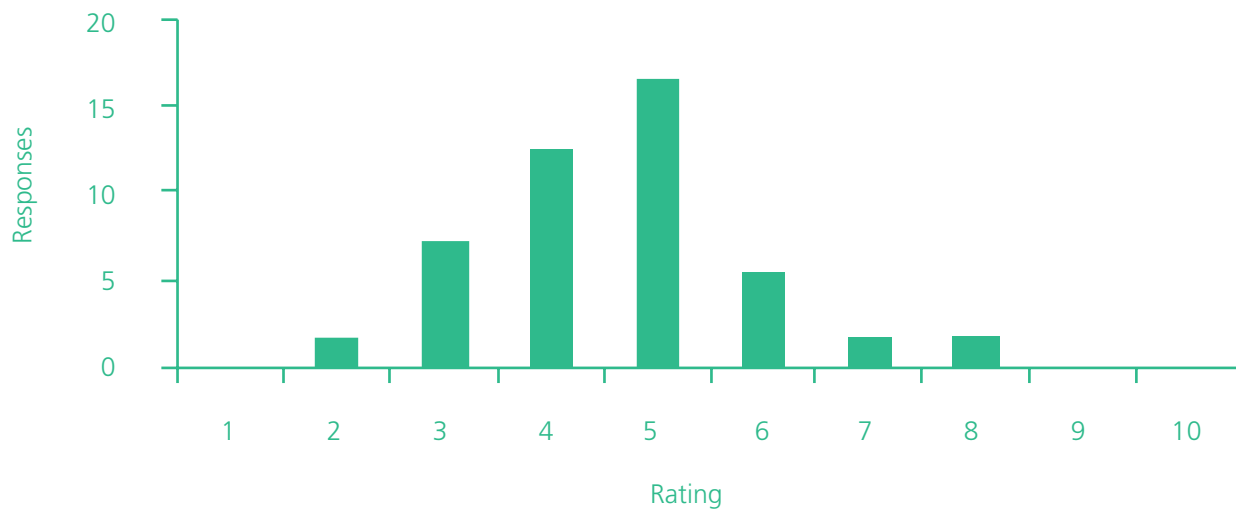
Base: 50 chief executives

Source: TRU

An important part of the communications jigsaw is the balance of responsibilities between services and the council communications function. Chief executives tended to place greater responsibility with the services for the public perceptions of their services. This response is in keeping with other findings about the relationship of communications to overall council business. When we asked chief executives where they would like to be on this scale, most said in the middle. The message from this is that chief executives want to see communications and services taking equal responsibility for the public perception of services.

## Public perception of services

**Question: On a scale of one to ten, where one is service departments are responsible for public perceptions of their services and where ten is the communications team is responsible for the public perception of services, where would you place your council?**



Base: 50 chief executives

Source: TRU

# Impact and monitoring

Significantly, the majority of chief executives say that the benefits of communications to council performance are often intangible. This perception has a number of different sources. Partly this arises because of the challenge of isolating communications' contribution from other factors, partly it is due to the measures being used being too large, like changes in overall customer satisfaction, and finally, it is due to poor or non-existent evaluation and monitoring. The measures that are used are often outputs like press releases or media monitoring rather than specific key council messages or campaign recognition, or wider council outcomes.

Without proper impact evaluation measures it is difficult for the political and managerial leadership of the council to assess the contribution of communications to the council's successes. Developing these measures is a vital part of gaining credibility with the top of the organisation. Until this happens, it is not difficult to appreciate the leadership perception that communications should be about channel management as opposed to having a strategic impact for the better in the council.

"Anecdotal measures really. The monthly log of media interest. Customer satisfaction returns from front end services. Complaints and surveys using our citizens' panel."

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

"Gets its message across locally and nationally. They can directly point to work which has enhanced our reputation, and there are good relations with staff."

**Chief Executive, London Council**

"The only way is the number of press releases."

**Chief Executive, District Council**

"Not always apparent but when it's there it jumps out at you, especially around dealing with controversial issues. We measure coverage by media channel and survey public satisfaction."

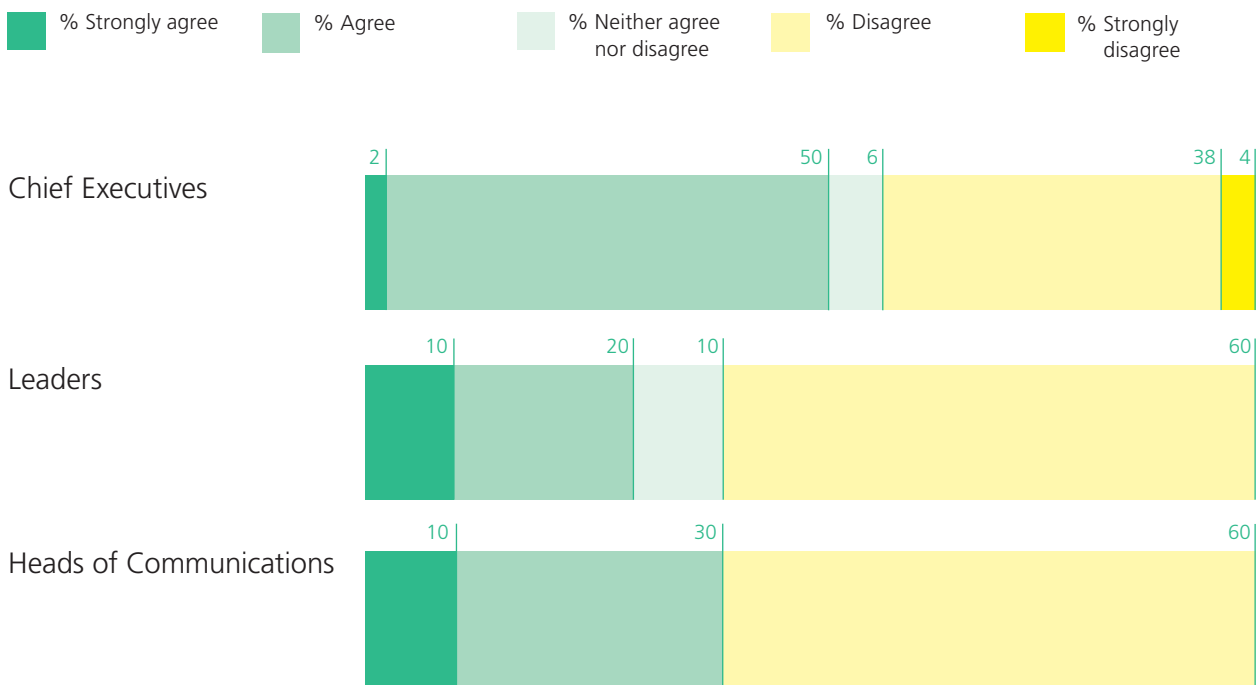
**Chief Executive, Unitary Council**

"The centre of the organisation has good awareness of their impact but at service delivery less so and there is even some resentment."

**Chief Executive, County Council**

## Measurable impact?

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the benefits of communications to our performance are often intangible?**



Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communications

Source: TRU

Leaders suggest a similar picture.

“Bit patchy really, though there is clearly resident awareness on [some campaigns]. We have just started media monitoring.”

**Leader, London Council**

“Had an impact on recycling, the more people knew the better the outcome. We use residents’ surveys, letters and measures from the contact centre.”

**Leader, County Council**

“Impact not necessarily measured unless a performance measurement or perception of service.”

**Leader, Metropolitan Council**

Just under half the heads of communications we spoke to recognise this as an area for improvement. TRU suggest that generally councils need to improve a great deal in this area. High quality impact evaluation is a key part of the business case for communications.

“We feel we make an impact, especially on change of behaviour stuff like recycling where we can see the change. But generally it is limited and uncoordinated.”

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**Head of Communications, Unitary Council**

“Very strong a good case study would be roads where residents thought we performed poorly...the service has improved a lot and we did a lot of marketing about roads on buses and billboard telling people about these changes and have seen public perceptions improve.”

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**Head of Communications, County Council**

“Some key things we have done have been absolutely crucial like the communications around building schools for the future. In some areas we knew it was not exactly what people wanted...on the whole, we were able to make a complex case easy for people to understand and to allay many of their fears.”

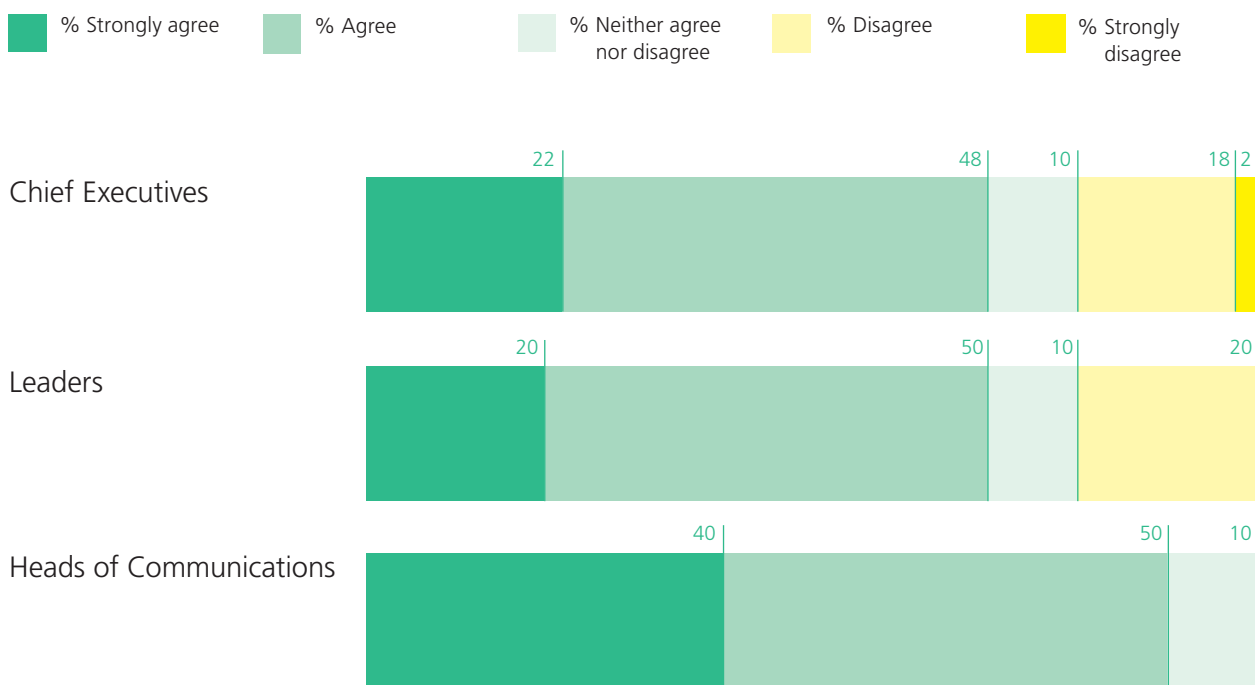
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**Head of Communications, Metropolitan Council**

Positively, there is widespread acknowledgement that communications play a fundamental role in encouraging the public to use council services. Communications need to make this impact tangible through monitoring and evaluation.

## Service quality and communications

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that in order to encourage the public to use council services, communicating the service to the usually as important as the quality of the service itself?**



Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communications

Source: TRU

# Internal communications

Chief executives see communications as playing a vital role in the council's relationship with staff. Positively, chief executives see internal communications contributing in significant ways to issues like change management and Single Status. Internal communications is an area where chief executives will often identify communications adding value for the council. This is an area of strength that heads of communications should build upon.

"Absolutely crucial. Our communications team is so important and they have lots of innovations in this area like video blogging."

**Chief Executive, County Council**

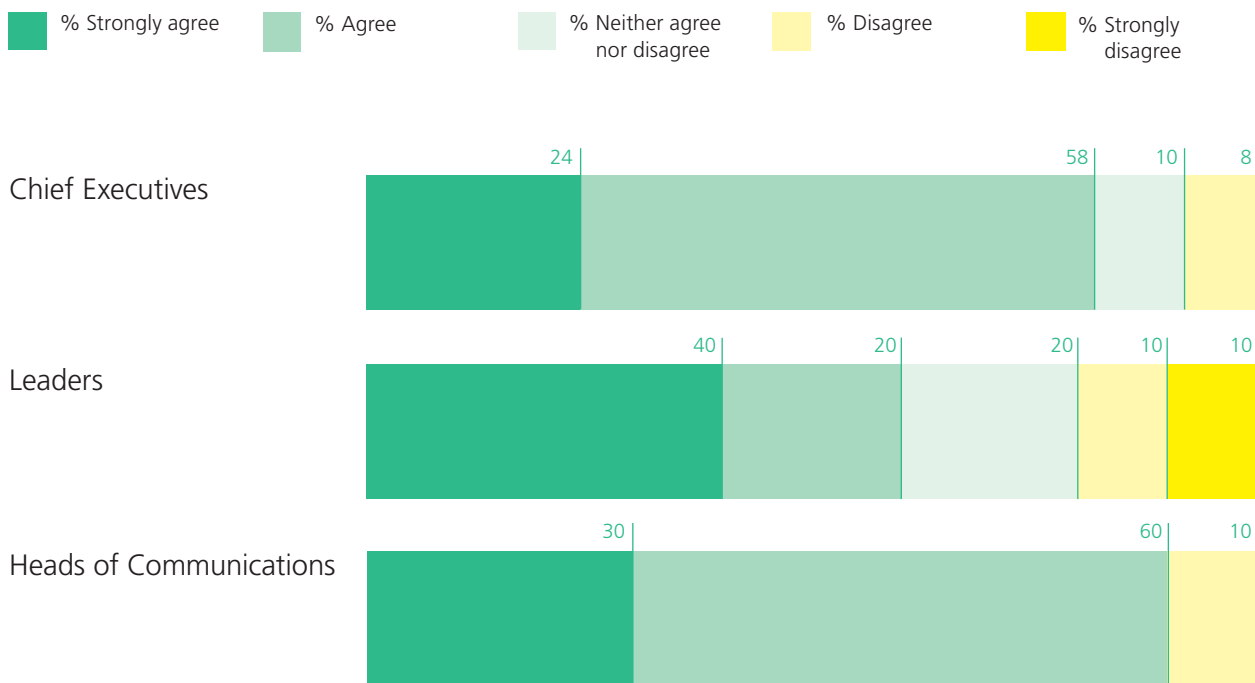
"Lots of very positive feedback and we have won awards. The comms team worked very closely with staff during the change management programme - making sure everyone was informed of what was happening and how it would directly affect individuals and departments. The Comms team also run the Manager's Forum - providing charismatic speakers in person or on video."

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

Given the successes in internal communications that chief executives have observed in the own councils or have heard about from others, a significant number said that internal communications was an area they wished to improve in and expand on. In particular, they pointed to improving the intranet, having more structure around communications between different tiers of the organisations and widening responsibility for communication beyond the communications team.

## Staff advocacy

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the communication team encourages staff to become positive advocates for the council?**



Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communications

Source: TRU

Most leaders also saw the benefits of internal communications with staff. Many of the heads of communications equally felt internal communications was an area of strength. In some cases, internal communications had been a vital catalyst in getting staff passionate about working for their council and increasing staff satisfaction.

“We feel we helped to show how important staff perceptions are [to senior officers and members] because the staff as ambassadors’ role was missing here.”

**Head of Communications, Unitary Council**

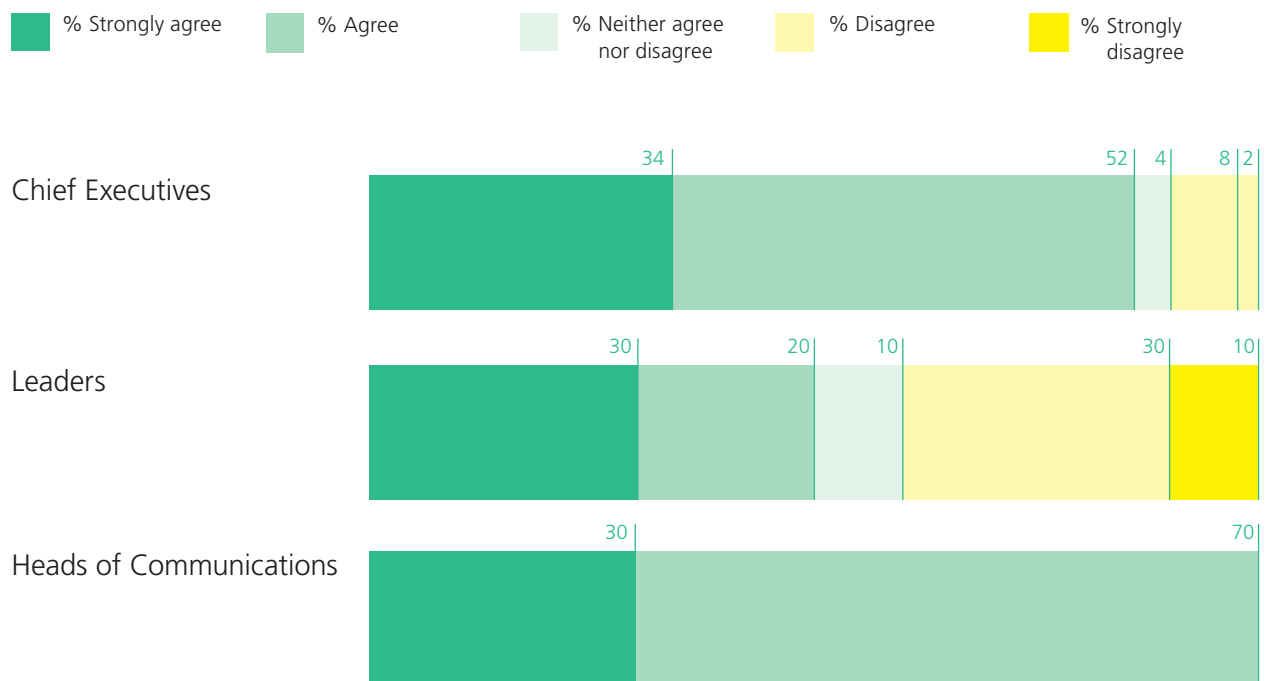
“Internal communications has been a driving force for council...the council has changed around and improved hugely and we now have one of the highest staff satisfactions scores in the country. Staff feel involved and take pride in working for us. We conducted a number of campaigns that captured the imagination of staff”.

**Head of Communications, District Council**

All the heads of communications and more than eight in ten chief executives said that communications have a pivotal role in the council’s relationship with staff. This perception was lower amongst leaders, which may simply be an outcome of lower awareness.

## Staff relations

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the communication team plays a pivotal role in our relationship with staff?**



Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communications

Source: TRU

# Partners and stakeholders

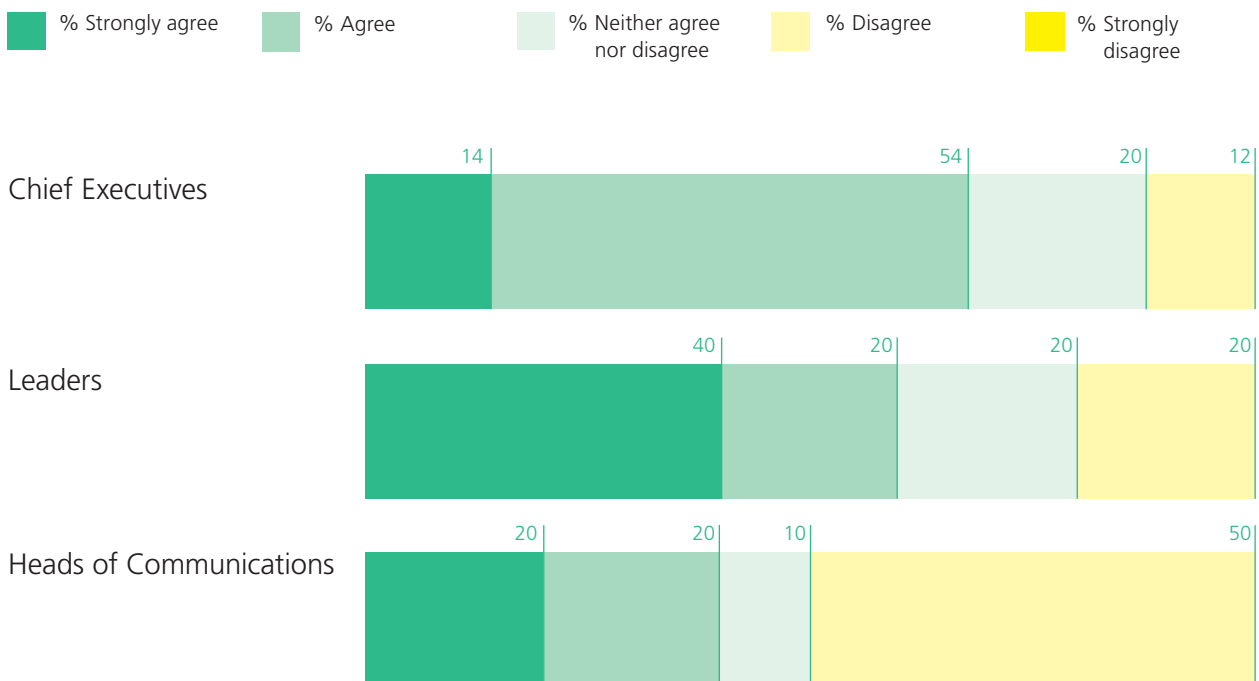
Partnership working and stakeholder engagement are seen as important up and coming issues. Communications functions will need to forge new relationships with partners and improve their engagement of partners and stakeholders.

Like internal communications, chief executives are positive about the role communications is playing in these relationships. More than two-thirds of chief executives said that communications had a key role to play in the council’s relationships with partners and key stakeholders. Leaders shared a similar balance of views.

Interestingly, though indicative, half the heads of communications disagreed that they had a pivotal role here. This finding is in distinct contrast with their positive perceptions of their role in staff engagement. There is clear support from the council’s leadership for communications to have a pivotal role in working with partners and stakeholders. Heads of communications may well need to be more positive about what they are doing in this area.

## Partners and stakeholders

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the communication team play a pivotal role in our relationship with our partners and key stakeholders?**



Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communications

Source: TRU

# Communications programmes

The LGA Reputation Campaign has high levels of recognition amongst chief executives and heads of communications. Awareness was lower amongst leaders. The impact of the LGA Reputation Campaign has been to raise the profile of communications in terms of driving perceptions about council satisfaction amongst chief executives and leaders. It has provided evidence to demonstrate the importance of communications, which has often not been forthcoming from communications functions themselves.

“Very good. Has helped us focus on relations between communications and reputation and satisfaction and provided access to advice.”

**Chief Executive, Unitary Council**

“Got it in our heads and doing a lot of what is required.”

**Chief Executive, London Council**

“The LGA Reputation campaign helps concentrate people’s minds.”

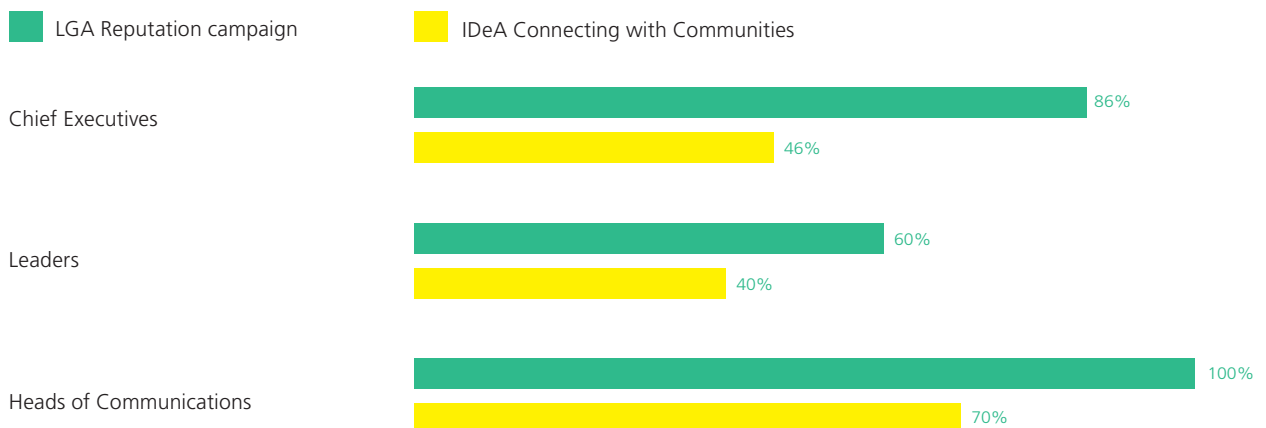
**Leader, County Council**

“The initial impact was fairly major.”

**Head of Communications, County Council**

## Communications programmes

**Question: Have you heard of the?**



Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communications

Source: TRU

However, there are a significant number of respondents who said that they were already doing what the campaign suggested and or that it had not made much of a difference.

“Heard of it but wouldn’t pretend it had a strategic role but has provided us with a rationale.”

**Chief Executive, District Council**

“Yes we have heard of it but we are already doing it.”

**Chief Executive, County Council**

“Have heard of it but making very little difference at the current time.”

**Leader, Metropolitan Council**

“The impact has been limited in that we have a fairly low informed rating.”

**Head of Communications, Unitary Council**

The strength of the LGA Reputation campaign lies in delivering on branding, communications and engagement as well as services. Consequently, the power of the campaign is diminished if communications have not persuaded the political and managerial leadership of the merits of its full application.

Awareness of the IDeA’s Connecting with communities was considerably lower, roughly half in the case of chief executives. Even amongst those who had heard of it, few said that they used it.

“I have heard of it but please don’t ask me about it.”

**Chief Executive, Unitary Council**

“It provides a voice for the community.”

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

# Spending

Just over half of the chief executives interviewed said that they would be spending more on communications and engagement activities. Significantly, the vast majority of this additional spending was for community engagement, often following a change in political leadership and to support MAA/CAA ambitions. Some of this additional spending was identified as statutory spending on items like the new Place Survey. Less than ten per cent of chief executives were expecting to put more money specifically into communications.

“More spending is tied to the new political leadership. They want more public engagement.”

**Chief Executive, Unitary Council**

“We are setting up an engagement section.”

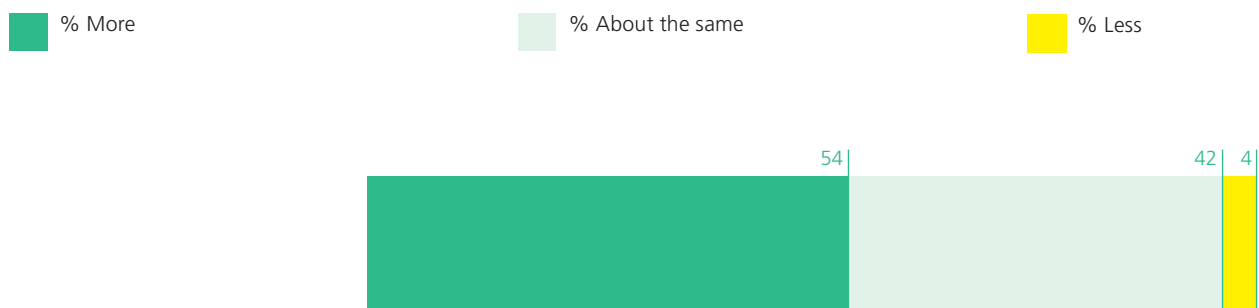
**Chief Executive, London Council**

“Spending more on communications and engagement because it is important that we connect better with the public.”

**Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council**

## Spending

**Q) Over the next 12 months, do you expect your council to spend less, more or about the same on communications and engagement activities?**



Base: 50 chief executives

Source: TRU

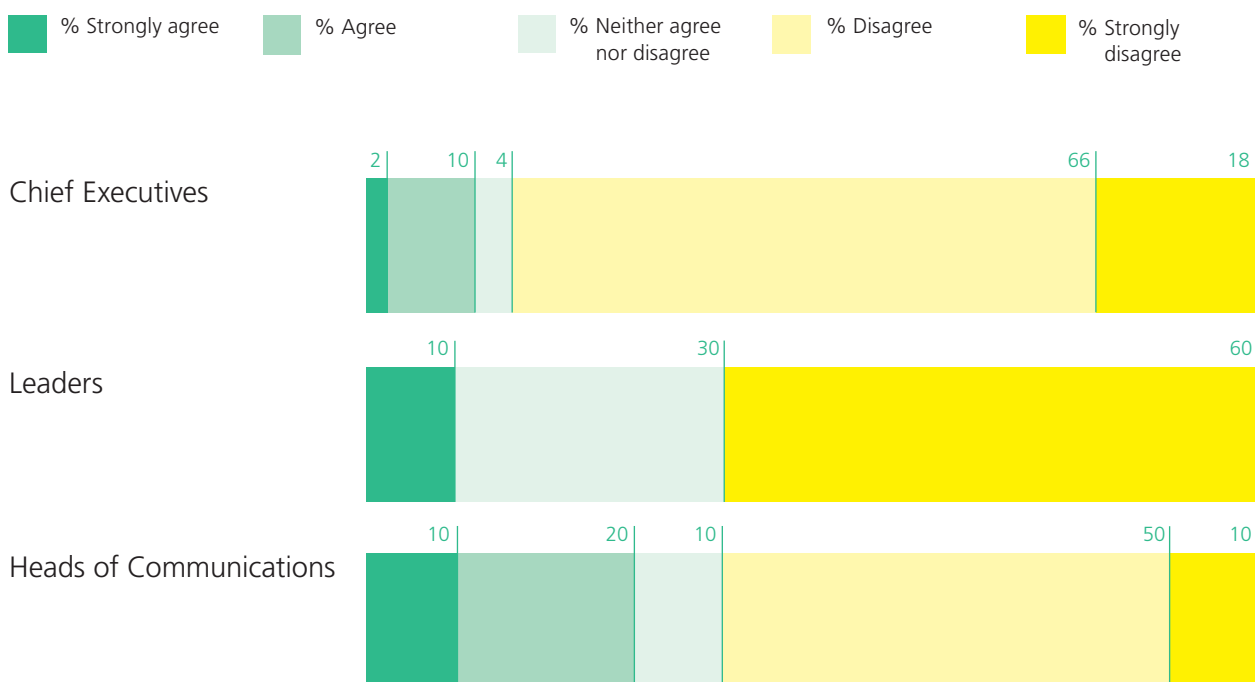
# Status, skills and attributes

LGcommunications also wanted to assess the influence of heads of communications in comparison to other key roles within the council. On this basis, chief executives were asked to compare the roles of head of communications and head of finance within their own council.

This question shows clearly that there is a large gap between perceptions of heads of communications and senior members of staff like the head of finance. Only one in eight chief executives felt they had similar status.

## Communication status

**Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the head of communications has the same status in the council as the head of finance?**



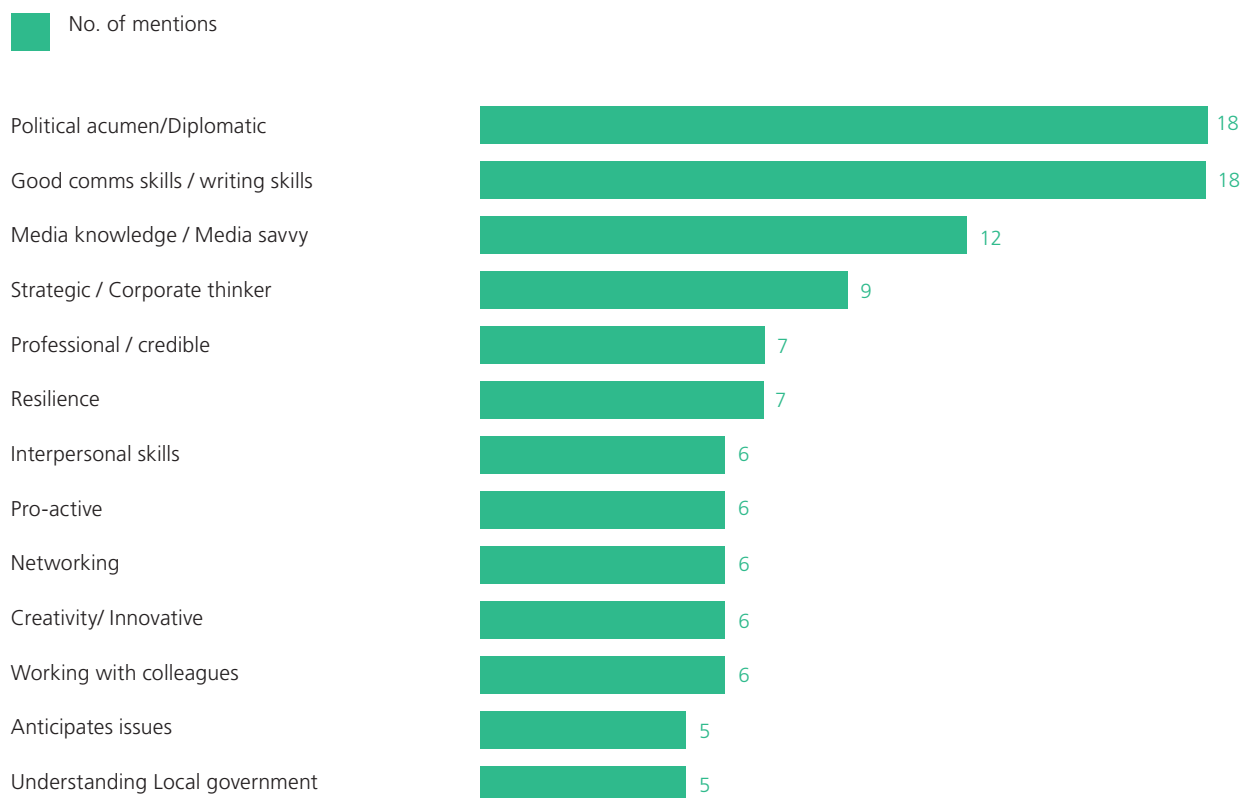
Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communications

Source: TRU

Chief executives were also asked what they were looking for from a head of communications. The set of skills and attributes identified by chief executives feeds into a media relations, channel focussed model of communications. The key attributes are political acumen, good communications skills (often expressed in terms of good writing skills) and knowing how things will play in the media.

## Skills and attributes

**Question: What skills and attributes are you looking for from a head of communications?**



Base: 50 chief executives

Source: TRU

# Expert interviews

As well as interviews with local government principals, members of the LGcommunications Executive Committee interviewed experts in the field of communications and consultation for their insights for local government.

## Challenges for local government and communicators

In line with the local government perspective, the experts identified funding, value for money, and partnership working. They also highlight rising expectations, better engagement, understanding of different audiences and taking the marketing role of services more seriously.

“More research is needed into understanding different audiences and stakeholders. Need to get smarter over use of resources. Councils need to move away from the media role and take the marketing discipline much more seriously. Councils need to be seen to be doing what they say they are doing – communications can play a vital role in achieving this. [Communicators need to focus on] E-communication. There is a general impression that we are not driving this kind of communication hard or fast enough. Although we are to some extent in a hybrid situation at the moment between generations who use web and those who do not...in the future e-communications will be the core of all communications. Also need to get call centres right.”

**Ray Jones, Chartered Institute of Marketing**

“Enhancing reputation – Political and economic environments will be harder but expectations around reputation will be higher.”

**Carol Grant, Grant Riches**

“In the next 12 months its going to be about the budget and efficiency. However, over the next 3-4 years, it would be about efficiency, place shaping and recruitment. [Communicators need to be dealing with] rising customer expectations, doing more for less and demonstrating value for money...The strategic role of the council as leaders of the locality, communications for the public services of the place, communications promoting the place as well as the council. Consultation and listening - the customer voice. Understanding the hard to reach e.g. businesses, people who are disengaged. Front-line staff need to know the organisation’s brand/values.”

**Jonathan Flowers, Veredus**

“Filling the gap between what central government says local councils should be now doing and how we are actually going to go about achieving it. Some aspects of the government’s empowerment agenda have yet to become clear so locals councils have been left in the dark and aren’t clear about what they are expected to achieve and how. The public don’t believe anything politicians say and the negative comments associated with MPs have rubbed off onto local councils and councillors. All councils now get tarred with the same brush. The media does a great disservice to councils generally. Somehow councils have got to rise above the noise levels of everyone else who wants to be heard.”

**Rhion Jones, Consultation Institute**

“Public sector squeeze on pay. Changes to regulatory framework... Communicators need to convince chief executives and leaders that communications is vital when dealing with change (which is what councils will be increasingly going through).”

**Marina Pirotta, Tribal**

## Hallmarks of effective communications

While those in local government focus on public satisfaction and media relations, our experts focus on quite a recognisably different picture. Our experts suggest more attention ought to be paid to strategic communications, demonstrating impact and leadership, customer care and community engagement.

“Well respected by leadership (members and officers). Right at the heart of decision-making. Able to demonstrate measurable outcomes. High level of service and responsiveness. A cost-effective function.”

**Carol Grant, Grant Riches**

“Pro-activity, coherent brand, corporate - can see the bigger picture, well crafted messages, communications function held in high regard by other services.”

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**Jonathan Flowers, Veredus**

“Council offices and service centres need to be model examples of excellence in customer service and appearance. Council staff still have a reputation for being the most uncooperative and untrained group of people. Minimum complaints about the council (not sure we can put this entirely down to communications). All staff, no matter where they are in the organisation, are part of the communications plan, especially those that are customer facing.”

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**Ray Jones, Chartered Institute of Marketing**

“A service that thinks strategically and enables departments to do it themselves – becoming trainers and enablers, and which shows leadership in communications.”

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**Marina Pirotta, Tribal**

“Need to fully understand the stakeholder relationship and need to fully appreciate the power and influence of face to face communications and engagement and use to the maximum. This is the way we will change perceptions and build reputation.”

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**Rhion Jones, Consultation Institute**

## Skills and attributes for heads of communications

Like those in local government, almost all the experts point to the importance of political awareness and strategic ability.

“Being able to see the bigger picture, reconciling conflicting objectives, ability to challenge, good communicators, being able to nuance, thinking about segmentation – different communications to different citizens e.g. different media releases tailored to different media, politically aware – understanding party politics.”

**Jonathan Flowers, Veredus**

“Political nous (with a big and small ‘P’). Good strategic sense – matched with a clear focus on outcomes, there needs to be the blend of both otherwise too focused on strategy and not enough on delivery. Influencing skills must have the attention of the ‘top table’. Passion and energy.”

**Carol Grant, Grant Riches**

“Strategic, able to see the big picture. Partnership and influencing skill. Being a good people manager.”

**Marina Pirotta, Tribal**

“Primarily – political skills. Ability to lead on the engagement and empowerment agenda. Technical skills and know how: everyone thinks they can do communications and consultation – they can’t.”

**Rhion Jones, Consultation Institute**

“Need a good track record of achievement. Should be qualified. Need to be ace at internal communications and selling.”

**Ray Jones, Chartered Institute of Marketing**

## Reputational challenges

In comparison to local government respondents, there is less focus on council services per se and more on branding, visible actions and face to face communications as well as getting the basics right.

“Perception of councillors. Branding is important but also the challenge of being seen to spend money on spin. Staff being proud of being part of the council rather than generally wanting to disassociate themselves. Taking the brand associations from the place – which can be positive or negative depending on the area.”

**Jonathan Flowers, Veredus**

“Get better at telling people what you have done. Make results and actions highly visible.”

**Ray Jones, Chartered Institute of Marketing**

“Get the basics right. Corporate role. First-rate press function. Website. Council magazine. Showing value for money in relation to services. LGA reputation campaign is important as a benchmark. Engagement and consultation is less important.”

**Carol Grant, Grant Riches**

“Councils need to think about one brand for local government like the NHS.”

**Marina Pirotta, Tribal**

“Face to face communications at every opportunity. Develop decent stakeholder databases - know the movers and shakers. Have a clear plan about engagement and empowerment.”

**Rhion Jones, Consultation Institute**

## Strategic challenge and communicator development

In terms of moving to strategic communications, our experts offer no easy answers. Perhaps the key message here is that to progress communicators need to much better evidence their contribution to the successes of their councils.

“Communications could leverage their relationship with media relations, being pro-active, taking an opportunity of getting involved with LAAs and LSPs... Perception of communications as a profession in local government is growing – but need to develop into marketing rather than just communications. Not all local government communicators are marketeers – so don’t just re-name existing staff. Use internal communications as a showcase for the reputation of communications.”

**Jonathan Flowers, Veredus**

“Key thing is to demonstrate value to the organisation. Not about a formal hierarchy but about being at the heart of an organisation. Strategic input and the political interface are key in showing worth to the organisation. Get out more to see what others are doing and horizon scanning. Increased political awareness. Focus on improvements.”

**Carol Grant, Grant Riches**

“Lead the empowerment and engagement agenda. Get closer to councillors. Better training and more qualifications around technical skills.”

**Rhion Jones, Consultation Institute**

“The profession needs to be taken seriously but the position has to be earned – no one has an automatic right to a seat at the top table. Only 14 top companies have marketing professional on the board – that’s how tough it is. Marketing professionals need to raise their game and evidence what they have contributed to the business plan. Need to get better at evaluation and measurement.”

**Ray Jones, Chartered Institute of Marketing**

“People need to look at themselves. If they aren’t getting the influence they want then that may suggest that they don’t have the influencing skills. If people are good communicators but aren’t getting the influence or recognition from their chief executive or leader then they should change jobs.”

**Marina Pirotta, Tribal**

## Training

Local government senior communicators require training around working in political environment at a senior management level, to experience the pressures of running a front-line service and to learn more about engagement and face to face communication.

“There is lots of technical and professional training available but needs to be more on the political dimension and senior management level.”

**Carol Grant, Grant Riches**

“Better presentations skills. Top managers’ programmes. Partnership skills. Communicators need to be in control of their own destiny, too, and use networking opportunities to learn and find out more from other communicators. If their councils won’t pay for this, people should offer to do workshops or speak in return for a free place.”

**Marina Pirotta, Tribal**

“Broader consultancy skills. Understanding what’s like to be a head of service or a politician through secondments, work shadowing or going to a member’s surgery.”

**Jonathan Flowers, Veredus**

“Training around stakeholder relationships and the more complex engagement techniques.”

**Rhion Jones, Consultation Institute**

