

Heads of Communications Survey 2023

Research Report

October 2023



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Foreword

Thank you for your interest in the results of the LGA's 2023 Heads of Communications' Survey.

We are very grateful to those who participated in this survey, especially as we know how busy communications leaders and their teams are.

Two years' ago, when we ran the last LGA survey of this kind, local authorities were responding to COVID-19. In September 2021, when we began the last survey, after 18 months of pandemic communications, teams had started to address business as usual activities once again. Juggling the demands of public health messaging, increased internal communications as well as the needs of council services and economic recovery stretched many communications teams to the limit.

Moving with the times, in this survey, we removed the COVID-19 specific questions and added a question about office, home and hybrid working practices. We know that it has been a dilemma for local authorities balancing a desire to be a flexible employer with the benefits that communications teams get from face-to-face contact. The results are set out in table 14.

Many survey questions remained the same in 2023, as we know from our work with councils, fire services and combined authorities that data about the size of teams and priorities is valued and used for benchmarking. Results about team sizes showed little change, overall, since 2021 and can be found in tables 3 to 7.

Training and development preferences of heads of communications were also remarkably consistent; the top three from 2021 (evaluation and insight, behaviour change and campaign planning) remained the same in 2023 but we see high levels of interest in upskilling teams in video production, strategic skills and stakeholder engagement too, as portfolios and priorities change. Based on these findings, we will work with partners, such as LGComms, to ensure we can help our members address development needs.

Almost half of respondents (49 per cent) said that online abuse of councillors and officers was a problem in their authority. This figure was up very slightly from 47 per cent in 2021, when we first introduced this question to the survey. It is a worrying trend but unsurprising given the reports of online experiences shared from all areas of politics and day-to-day life.

Another finding that remains worrying relates to the lack of diversity within our profession at a senior level. The results are shown in table 1. The need for

communications teams to reflect the communities they serve is widely recognised but it seems there is still much work to be done.

Questions that received very different answers in this survey, when compared to the last, related to the communications priorities of local authorities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the pressures we discuss and see reported each day, financial sustainability topped the list.

Environment and climate change, which in 2021, for the first time, was the top priority of 45 per cent of respondents, fell from first to fifth place in the list this year. In some cases, priorities set out two years ago could, it be argued, have been achieved and replaced with new ones, so change is inevitable. Using the results to monitor how budgets, politics and community needs continue to be reflected in the work of local authority communications teams is a core part of this survey.

Change has also affected the way our communications support and improvement programme is funded and we have transitioned to a new model. We are pleased to continue to provide communications support to our members by deriving income from other sources, strategic partnerships and recovering costs for communications health checks and peer reviews. Thank you for your support and to those who said they would be interested in shaping the future of our programme so that it meets the needs of member authorities.

Through our new Heads of Communications Network, which launched in October 2023, we will be meeting communications leaders regularly throughout the year. We aim to use the network to discover and act upon your requests and concerns as well as learn from the experiences and successes of members.

We hope that the results of this survey are helpful and we look forward to working with you throughout 2024 and beyond.

Nicky Old
Director of Communications
Local Government Association

Summary

Background

Between October and December 2023, the Local Government Association (LGA) conducted a survey of heads of communications in local authorities, fire and rescue services, and combined authorities in England and Wales.

The purpose of the survey was to gather information on the current state of local government communications at the local authority level and to enable the LGA to assess the sector on issues such as the size and structure of communications teams, budgets and future strategies. A copy of the survey questions can be seen in Annex A.

The survey asked about a range of topics, including reporting structures, partnership work, post-pandemic working arrangements, internal communications, online abuse and intimidation of members and officers, communications priorities, and training needs. The survey achieved a response rate of 33 per cent.

Key findings

- 91 per cent of respondent heads of communications were from a white English/Welsh/Scottish/ Northern Irish/British ethnic background and 55 per cent were aged between 35 and 49 years.
- On average, 10.3 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff were working in corporate communications teams in respondent authorities.
- The type of council with the highest average number of communications staff was shire counties, at 21.2 FTE staff. Shire districts had the lowest average number of communications staff at 4.5 FTEs.
- 64 per cent of respondents had staff performing core communications functions in other parts of their authority, with the average number of staff involved in this being 5.1 FTE.
- The type of council with the highest average number of staff performing core communications functions in other parts of the authority was shire counties, at 15.0 FTE staff. Again, shire districts had the lowest average number of communications staff, at 3.6 FTEs.
- 72 per cent of respondent heads of communications reported to a service head or director and 23 per cent reported to the chief executive.
- 42 per cent of heads of communications in respondent authorities sat on their council's corporate/senior management team or equivalent.

- 37 per cent of respondent authorities required corporate communications staff to work from the office for a minimum of two days per week, 17 per cent specified one day, and 13 per cent three days.
- 49 per cent of respondents agreed that online abuse and intimidation of councillors and officers was a problem in their authority.
- The top three communications priorities for respondents' authorities over the next 12 months were most commonly financial sustainability (38 per cent), internal change/transformation programmes (28 per cent), community engagement (27 per cent), economic development/regeneration (26 per cent), and the environment and climate change (25 per cent).
- The top three types of training and professional development that respondents thought would be useful were: evaluation and insight (63 per cent); behaviour change (50 per cent); and campaign planning (50 per cent).

Methodology

In October 2023 the LGA sent an online survey to heads of communications, or their equivalent, in all 396 local authorities, fire authorities and combined authorities in England and Wales. Responses were received from 132, a response rate of 33 per cent.

This level of response means that these results should not be taken as being necessarily representative of all authorities.

Some respondents did not answer all questions in the survey, so within this report findings are based on different numbers of responses. This number (the base) is shown below all tables. Only one response was received from a combined authority so they are excluded from any tables showing breakdowns by type of authority (though that response is included in the total row). In tables, percentages may add to more than 100 per cent due to rounding.

Survey findings

The survey asked respondents about their ethnic background and age group. More than nine out of 10 respondents (91 per cent) were from an English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British ethnic background. See Table 1.

Just over a half of respondents (55 per cent) were aged 35-49 years old and around two out of five (39 per cent) were aged 50-64. See Table 2.

Table 1. Ethnic background of respondents

	Per cent
English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British	91
Any other White background	4
Asian	0
Mixed	3
Black	1
Any other ethnic group	2
Prefer not to say	0

Base: 125

Table 2. Age group of respondents

	Per cent
Under 25 years	0
25-34 years	6
35-49 years	55
50-64 years	39
65 years or over	0
Prefer not to say	0

Base: 123

Respondents were asked how many full-time equivalents (FTE) staff were working in their council's corporate communications team performing core functions. Core functions were defined as:

- media relations
- crisis communications
- campaigns/marketing
- reputation management
- internal communications
- print/design
- web/digital/social media communications.

The overall average (mean) number of staff was 10.3 FTEs, ranging from a

minimum of one to a maximum of 40. The median was 7.5 FTEs. It should be noted that not all teams deliver all the core functions listed above, and that core functions may not encompass the same activities in all councils. See Table 3.

Table 3. Number of FTE core communications staff

Number	
Minimum	1
Maximum	40
Mean	10.3

Base: 131

The type of authority with the highest average number of communications staff was shire counties, at 21.2 FTEs. Shire districts had the lowest average number of communications staff at 4.5 FTEs. London boroughs and metropolitan districts had similar averages, both slightly more than 16 FTEs. See Table 4.

Table 4. Number of FTE core communications staff by authority type

	Average	Min	Max	Base
Shire county	21.2	11	27	10
Shire district	4.5	1	14	53
London borough	16.4	8	31	12
Metropolitan district	16.3	6	25	17
Unitary authority	11.8	2	22	29
Fire authority	9.0	3	40	9
Total	10.3	1	40	131

Base: 131

Just under two-thirds of respondents (64 per cent) reported that there were staff in other parts of their authority performing core communications functions. On average the number of these staff was 5.1 FTEs, with a minimum of 0¹ and a maximum of 50. Respondents were asked to write-in the other teams in which these staff were located. This was most commonly web team/digital services. Others mentioned included marketing, housing, economic development, and print and design.

¹ Note: it is possible that respondents only had part-time or temporary FTE staff working in core communications roles in other parts of the authority, hence the minimum reported number is 0.

Table 5. Number of FTE staff performing core communications functions in other parts of the authority

Number	
Minimum	0
Maximum	50
Mean	5.1

Base: 132

The type of authority with the highest average number of staff performing core communications functions in other parts of the authority was shire counties, at 15.0 FTEs. Again, shire districts had the lowest average number of communications staff, at 3.6, although that was only marginally lower than the figure for metropolitan districts (3.8).

Table 6. Number of FTE staff performing core communications functions in other parts of the authority by authority type

	Average	Min	Max	Base
Shire county	15.0	3	50	7
Shire district	3.6	1	12	26
London borough	5.7	1	20	6
Metropolitan district	3.8	1	10	11
Unitary authority	4.3	0	12	19
Total	5.1	0	50	71

Base: 71

Fire authorities are not shown as there was only one response.

Just over two-fifths of respondents (45 per cent) said that the responsibility for their organisation's website and website staff sat in communications. Just under a quarter (23 per cent) reported that it sat with IT services and 14 per cent said customer services. Other written-in responses included transformation team, web and digital services, and split responsibility between communications and IT.

Table 7. Area in which responsibility for the organisation's website and website staff sit

Per cent	
Communications	45
IT	23
Customer services	14
Other	18

Base: 132

Just under three-quarters of respondents (72 per cent) reported to a service head or director, and just under a quarter (23 per cent) reported to the chief executive.

Table 8. Heads of Communications' line managers

Per cent	
Chief executive (or equivalent)	23
Service head / director	72
Other	5

Base: 132

Just over two-fifths (42 per cent) of heads of communications sat on their authority's corporate/senior management team or equivalent. See Table 9.

Table 9. Heads of Communications sitting on authority's corporate/senior management team or equivalent.

Per cent	
Yes	42
No	58

Base: 132

Three-quarters of respondents (75 per cent) reported that their authority had a communications strategy that was aligned to its corporate priorities.

Table 10. Communications strategy aligned to corporate priorities

Per cent	
Yes	75
No	25
Don't know	0

Base: 132

Three out of five respondents (61 per cent) reported that their authority had a corporate narrative.

Table 11. Whether the organisation has a corporate narrative

Per cent	
Yes	61
No	39
Don't know	1

Base: 132

On average, respondent authorities had 0.9 FTE posts dedicated to internal communications. The largest number in any authority was 5.0 FTEs, and 60 of the 129 respondents had no such posts.

Table 12. Number of FTE posts dedicated to internal communications

Number	
Minimum	0
Maximum	5.0
Mean	0.9

Base: 129

The average number of internal communications posts was highest in counties (2.7 FTEs) and London boroughs (2.1) and lowest in shire districts (0.3).

Table 13. Number of FTE posts dedicated to internal communications by authority type

	Average	Min	Max	Base
Shire county	2.7	0	5	10
Shire district	0.3	0	4	53
London borough	2.1	0	5	12
Metropolitan district	1.0	0	3	17
Unitary authority	1.1	0	4	28
Fire authority	0.9	0	5	8
Total	0.9	0	5	129

Base: 129

Just over a third of respondents (37 per cent) stated that, post-pandemic, corporate communications staff were expected to work in the office for at least two days per week. In 17 per cent the minimum requirement was one day and in 13 per cent it was three days.

A fifth of respondents indicated 'other' requirements, most of whom indicated that there was no fixed requirement to work in the office any number of days but that it was related to business need. Some respondents indicated that all staff worked remotely.

Table 14. Minimum number of days that corporate communications team is expected to work from the office each week

Per cent	
0 days	8
1 day	17
2 days	37
3 days	13
4 days	2
5 days	2
Other	20

Base: 132

Overall, just under half of respondents (49 per cent) either strongly agreed (10 per cent) or somewhat agreed (39 per cent) that ‘online abuse and intimidation of councillors and officers in [their] local authority is a problem’. Just under a third (31 per cent) either strongly disagreed (8 per cent) or somewhat disagreed (23 per cent).

Table 15. Agreement with the statement ‘online abuse and intimidation of councillors and officers in my local authority is a problem’

Per cent	
Strongly agree	10
Somewhat agree	39
Neither agree nor disagree	17
Somewhat disagree	23
Strongly disagree	8
Don’t know	3

Base: 132

The top three communications priorities for respondent authorities over the next 12 months were financial sustainability (38 per cent), internal change/transformation programmes (28 per cent), community engagement (27 per cent), economic development/regeneration (26 per cent), and environment and climate change (25 per cent). The priorities are shown in Table 16 below. Other priorities written in by respondents included housing/homelessness and recruitment.

Table 16. Top communications priorities for respondents' authorities over the next 12 months

	Per cent
Financial sustainability	38
Internal change/transformation programmes	28
Community engagement	27
Economic development/regeneration	26
Environment and climate change	25
Resident engagement	21
Internal communications and employee engagement	21
Reputation	20
Cost of living support	17
Behaviour change	14
Public affairs/influencing	13
Place branding	11
Crisis communication	7
Marketing income-generating services, e.g. leisure or tourism	5
Partnership working	4
Response to public health and safety	3
Achieving income targets	3
Social care campaigns	2
Tackling online abuse and intimidation	0
Safety and maintenance of schools and public buildings (linked to RAAC)	0
Other	11
None	0
Total	100

Base: 131. Please note that percentages may sum to more than 100 as respondents could select multiple answer options.

Just over two-fifths of respondents (42 per cent) reported that their organisation had an annual campaign plan that was signed off by senior leadership.

Table 17. Whether the organisation has an annual campaign plan signed off by senior leadership

	Per cent
Yes	42
No	56
Don't know	2

Base: 132

Authorities were asked to provide brief details of their most recent or future campaign themes, and a total of 114 did so. The most common themes were cost of living (48 authorities), waste/recycling (45), recruitment, mainly social work (22), environment/climate change (17), financial sustainability/council budget (15) and fostering (14).

Authorities were asked about the types of communications support that they would find most useful over the next 12 months. Three out of five respondents (60 per cent) thought that online workshops, events or seminars would be useful, 59 per cent indicated training or professional development, 50 per cent indicated case studies/online resources, and 48 per cent indicated networking and contact-building with other authorities. See Table 18.

Table 18. Communications support that respondents would find most useful over the next 12 months

	Per cent
Online workshops, events or seminars	60
Training or professional development	59
Case studies/online resources	50
Networking and contact-building with other authorities	48
In-person workshops, events or seminars	42
One-day health check of your authority's communications	30
Two or three-day strategic review of your authority's communications	22
Crisis communications support	14
Recruitment support	13
Bespoke support via email/telephone	7
Other	5
Don't know	2

Base: 132. Please note that percentages may sum to more than 100 as respondents could select multiple answer options.

Authorities were asked to indicate which areas of training and professional development would be useful for their teams. Just over three-fifths (63 per cent) of respondents said 'evaluation and insight' would be among the most useful areas. A half each said campaign planning and behaviour change, and just over two-fifths (41 per cent) said video. See Table 19.

Table 19. Training and professional development that respondents that would be most useful to the team

	Per cent
Evaluation and insight	63
Campaign planning	50
Behaviour change	50
Video	41
Strategic skills	39
Stakeholder engagement	37
Social media	36
Digital	29
Political awareness	24
Leadership skills	22
Crisis communication	21
Personal impact	15
Technical skills	13
Policy skills	12
Other	6
Don't know	2

Base: 131. Please note that percentages may sum to more than 100 as respondents could select more than one item.

Respondents were asked whether they would be willing to be a part of the LGA's pool of communications professionals to support councils, for example by helping to carry out peer reviews. Almost three-quarters (73 per cent) stated that they would be willing to do this.

Table 20. Whether respondents would be willing to be a part of the LGA's pool of communications professionals to support councils

	Per cent
Yes	73
No	27

Base: 132

Annex A – questionnaire

Heads of Communications Survey 2023

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your responses will help the LGA to effectively support and represent councils and fire and rescue services. Please answer each question as fully as you can.

How to complete the survey

You can navigate through the questions using the buttons at the end of each page. Use the 'previous' button at the bottom of the page if you wish to change your response to an earlier question.

If you stop before completing the survey, you can come back to this page, using the link supplied in the email, and you will be able to continue where you left off. To ensure your answers have been saved, click on the 'next' button at the bottom of the page that you were working on before exiting.

Data protection

All responses will be treated confidentially. Information will be aggregated, and no individual or authority will be identified in any publications without your consent. Identifiable information may be used internally within the LGA but will only be held and processed in accordance with our privacy statement.

Please amend the details we have on record if necessary. If you are responding on behalf of more than one authority, please note this in the 'authority' box below. If you are leading communications for more than one council or fire service, where budgets and teams are separate, please complete separate surveys for each authority.

Name _____

Authority _____

Job title _____

Email address _____

Q1 How many full-time equivalent staff are employed in your authority's corporate communications team performing core functions?

Core functions are defined as media relations, crisis communications, campaigns, marketing, reputation management, internal communications, print, design and web/digital/social media.

If you cannot provide an estimate, please enter 'Don't know'.

Q2 Are other staff performing any of these core communications functions in other parts of your authority (e.g. web or marketing teams)?

Yes (please specify in which teams or services below)

No

Don't know

Services _____

Q3 Approximately, how many full-time equivalent staff are performing these core communications functions in other parts of the authority?

If you cannot provide an estimate, please enter 'Don't know'.

Q4 Where does responsibility for your authority's website and website staff sit?

Communications

Customer services

IT

Other (please specify below)

Q5 Who is your line manager?

Chief Executive (or equivalent)

Service head/director (please specify below)

Other (please specify below)

Q6 Do you sit on your authority's corporate/senior management team or equivalent?

Yes

No

Q7 Does your authority have a communications strategy aligned to your corporate priorities?

Yes

No

Don't know

If yes, when was the strategy last published/ updated? _____

Q8 Does your authority have a corporate narrative?

Yes

No

Don't know

Q9 How many full-time equivalent posts, if any, does your authority have which are dedicated to internal communications?

Please enter '0' if none or 'Don't know' if the information is not available.

Q10 What is the minimum number of days that your corporate communications team is expected to work from the office each week?

0 days

1 day

2 days

3 days

4 days

5 days

Other, please outline the requirements _____

**Q11 To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statement:
“Online abuse and intimidation of councillors and officers in my local authority is a problem.”**

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree
- Don't know

Q12 What are the top three communications priorities for your authority over the next 12 months?

Please select up to three priorities.

- Partnership working
- Reputation
- Response to public health and safety
- Crisis communication
- Resident engagement
- Internal communications and employee engagement
- Financial sustainability
- Budget communications
- Community engagement
- Behaviour change
- Tackling online abuse and intimidation
- Place branding
- Economic development/regeneration
- Social care campaigns
- Internal change/transformation programmes
- Marketing income-generating services, for example leisure or tourism
- Achieving income targets
- Public affairs/influencing
- Environment and climate change
- Cost of living support
- Safety and maintenance of schools and public buildings (linked to RAAC)
- None
- Other (please specify below) _____

Q13 Does your authority have an annual campaign plan signed off by your senior leadership?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Please provide brief details of your most recent or future campaign themes (e.g. waste and recycling, social worker recruitment, cost of living support etc.)

Q14 What types of communications support would you find most useful over the next twelve months?

Please select all that apply.

- Bespoke support via email/telephone
- Case studies/online resources
- Crisis communications support
- Networking and contact-building with other councils
- One-day health check of your council's communications
- Two or three-day strategic review of your council's communications
- In-person workshops, events or seminars
- Online workshops, events or seminars
- Training or professional development
- Recruitment support
- Don't know
- Other (please specify below)

Q15 Which areas of training and professional development would be most useful for your team?

Please select all that apply.

- Strategic skills
- Political awareness
- Policy skills
- Campaign planning
- Evaluation and insight
- Personal impact
- Leadership skills
- Technical skills
- Crisis communication
- Stakeholder engagement
- Behaviour change
- Digital
- Social media
- Video
- Don't know
- Other (please specify below) _____

Q16 Would you be willing to be part of the LGA's pool of communications professionals to support councils by, for example, helping to conduct peer reviews?

- Yes
- No

Q17 The LGA provides a range of communications support services, including peer reviews, training and tailored workshops. Following changes to the way this work is funded, we now need to recover some of our costs. Would your council be interested in paying to commission communications support services?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Q18 Would you be willing to join an LGA focus group to discuss and help us create a new model to support councils and their communications function during the coming year?

Yes

No

Maybe

Q19 Would you be interested in being involved in content and/ or campaign co-creation?

Yes

No

Maybe

Q20 Please use the space below to add any other comments you may have

Demographic questions

Finally, we would be grateful if you would take a moment to answer two questions about yourself, please. This section of the survey will collect and process special category data in relation to your ethnicity and age group, which we do under condition (a) of Article 9(2) that the subject has given explicit consent for the processing of their data for such purposes and conditions.

Please confirm that you agree to us processing and holding this data: I agree to the LGA processing my special category data as laid out in Article 9(2)(a) of the Data Protection Act 2018. If you do not give your consent, you will not see these questions.

Yes, I agree

No, I do not agree

Q21 What is your ethnic group?

1. White

English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British
Irish

Gypsy or Irish Traveller

Roma

Other White background

2. Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups

White and Black Caribbean

White and Black African

White and Asian

Other Mixed or Multiple background

3. Asian or Asian British

Indian

Pakistani

Bangladeshi

Chinese

Other Asian background

4. Black, Black British, Caribbean or African

Caribbean

African background

Other Black, Black British or Caribbean background

5. Other ethnic group

Arab

Other ethnic group

6. Prefer not to say

Q22 Please select your age group.

Under 25 years

25-34 years

35-49 years

50-64 years

65 years or over

Prefer not to say



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