



South Tyneside Council

item 8

Report to the Council

Cabinet Portfolio/Lead Member: Leader of the Council

Report of the Director of Governance and Corporate Affairs

Subject: Influencing Strategy Update

Date: 5th September 2024

Wards affected: All

Council ambitions: Financially Secure, Connected to Jobs and Strong Communities

Does the report and any appendices contain information which has been identified as confidential or exempt?

☒ **No**, this report does not contain information identified as confidential or exempt.

For Executive Decisions only:

Is the decision a Key Decision? ☐ Yes ☒ No

Is it included in the Forward Plan? ☒ Yes ☐ No

If not in the Forward Plan is the report: ☐ General Exception Rule
☐ Special Urgency Rule

Relevant Scrutiny Chair: Cllr John McCabe, Overview & Scrutiny Chair

Is the decision eligible for call-in by Scrutiny? ☐ Yes ☒ No

(If the decision is anything other than any executive decision made by the Cabinet or a Key Decision made by an officer under delegated powers, call-in is not applicable. This should be explained in the report).

Purpose of Report

1. This report sets out the proposed change in focus of the South Tyneside Influencing Strategy to respond to the changing political environment both nationally and regionally.
2. The aim of the Influencing Strategy, coordinated by the Policy and Insight and Public Relations teams within the Governance and Corporate Affairs directorate, is to raise the profile of the borough amongst key influencers in order to achieve policy change and secure funding to benefit our residents and businesses.
3. Created in 2022, this involved targeting key influencers, such as Ministers, civil servants, thinktanks and local government groups, and has garnered significant results, such as securing Levelling Up funding for South Shields and Jarrow town centres.

Background Information

4. The Influencing Strategy was originally established in Spring 2022 and has involved a number of initiatives including a focussed lobbying plan on levelling up funding, letters to ministers, tours with civil servants, engagement with thinktanks such as Onward and New Local, the showcasing of key projects via the Local Government Association and Local Government Information Unit, and profile pieces in the Financial Times.
5. This updated strategy is based upon close collaboration between the Policy and Insight and Public Relations teams, reflecting the changes and re-focus of the Communications Engagement team following the LGA Peer Review of Communications last year. This has seen a more proactive approach implemented, allowing the council to raise the profile of key issues impacting the borough.
6. The South Tyneside Vision identified the major obstacles holding back growth, particularly poverty and financial security, and employment. The South Tyneside Vision's ambitions are designed to tackle these challenges and embrace the opportunities in the borough based on our assets, by ensuring our residents are financially secure and connected to jobs.
7. Therefore, it is important that our influencing strategy reflects this. Furthermore, there is ongoing and significant work happening in both areas, driven particularly through our leading role in the North East Combined Authority on employment, inclusion and skills, our innovative renewable energy projects and engagement with the Port of Tyne and the International Advanced Manufacturing Park and via the South Tyneside Anti-Poverty Strategy.
8. **We have, as a result, identified tackling poverty and maximising the opportunities from the sustainability agenda as our two main areas of initial focus for the Influencing Strategy.** This will allow us to prioritise these areas when it comes to engagement with Government, events, speaking opportunities, press articles and more, to form a coherent and joined-up plan and build the reputation of South Tyneside Council as a key voice.

9. These two areas are also priorities on the political agenda for both the North East Mayor, who made manifesto commitments to reducing child poverty and growing the green economy, and the new Labour Government. The latter have pledged a Child Poverty Strategy and set up a Taskforce, chaired by the Education Secretary, while one of their five core missions is to “make Britain a clean energy superpower to cut bills, create jobs and deliver security.”
10. There are also areas where the region and central government have policy levers that can be pulled and funding that can be accessed. For example, Labour’s commitments to a National Wealth Fund and Great British Energy offer significant opportunities for South Tyneside as the Government have stated they will invest in renewable energy projects, Electric Vehicle battery production and port infrastructure. There is also a focus through the Devolution Deal upon the Investment Zone and Green Superport, again incorporating our key green economy assets, as well as the expansion of the Child Poverty Prevention Programme to the south of Tyne council areas.
11. For each of these two areas, officers are building up an evidence base and proof points, key messages to be used and the target audience to share them with. This will equip Lead Members, other members, senior Council officers and wider partners with key lines to take and messaging to raise the profile of the borough and take a targeted approach to influencing and lobbying.

Poverty

12. In regard to poverty, our focus will be upon four core areas;
 - **Anti-poverty measures and the cost of living** – pushing for further focus in this area following our summits and Anti-Poverty Strategy, prioritising in-work poverty interventions and pushing for funding, such as Household Support Fund, to ensure vital projects such as community shops can continue;
 - **Child poverty** – our aims include working with the North East CA to achieve further funding for ongoing projects (such as those in our schools to reduce the cost of the school day), evaluate our approach and influence the national agenda (working closely with the North East Child Poverty Commission, aligning to the refresh of the Children’s Services vision);
 - **Benefits** – aiming to influence in order to reverse problematic welfare changes that disproportionately impact our residents as well as improve Universal Credit;
 - **Health inequalities** – to examine innovative approaches on issues such as Free School Meals, food provision and interventions within the first 1,001 days in order to reduce health inequalities; something recognised in the new Government’s manifesto.

Sustainability

13. In regard to sustainability,

- **Green Economy** – Continue to promote the nationally-significant assets in the borough, such as the Port and IAMP, which can help the Government deliver its mission to make Britain a green energy superpower, lever in private sector investment and ensure the UK is at the forefront of the drive to Net Zero. Promote the use of local content to ensure local residents can benefit.
- **Renewable energy** – Ensure that we raise the profile of our work in reducing carbon emissions, including on a national stage with our innovative renewable energy projects, in order to secure further funding (for example, for the Holborn Renewable Energy Network). Also push the need for retrofitting of existing housing stock as a key ask.
- **Natural environment** – Use our leading role through the LGA Coastal Special Interest Group and other platforms (such as the North East Rural & Coastal Taskforce) to highlight and maintain key projects such as Stronger Shores, our innovative Motion for the Ocean work and highlight and seek funding to tackle issues such as coastal landfill and erosion.

Main issues and Options to be Considered

14. As described above, we are developing the narrative, evidence and asks for these two focus areas. These will be used to target three sets of audiences;

- **Central government**; such as through ministerial letters and visits, civil servant engagement and tours. We have a database of contacts and previous engagement to draw upon;
- **North East Combined Authority**; through the work of Lead Members and officers on portfolio Advisory Boards, coordinated through the officer Devolution Working Group;
- **Wider influencers** that can help amplify our message and raise our profile; we have recently reviewed our subscriptions to key organisations and can utilise the links into the Local Government Association, Local Government Information Unit, Association of Public Sector Excellence, thinktanks and media channels. The role of ambassadors is also crucial, particularly key figures such as the Port of Tyne and North East Child Poverty Commission.

15. This work is also being coordinated with the work of Invest South Tyneside to ensure key marketing messages are aligned to attract private sector investment, including working closely with the private sector at strategic sites such as the Port of Tyne and IAMP.

16. In addition, we are working closely with Public Health and wider colleagues on maximising opportunities to influence through research work. An example of this is the evaluation funding secured through the NIHR which enabled one of the first evaluations of warm spaces in the UK to take place in South Tyneside; it found that our warm spaces (now welcoming places) were making a real impact in the community.

17. We have developed a number of tools to help us do this and are exploring others. These include;

- Equipping Lead Members, Scrutiny Chairs and members across the chamber with key messages (and evidence) on South Tyneside's asks of the North East Combined Authority and Government in relation to poverty and sustainability;
- Policy Deepdives into individual policy areas (such as planning and housing) and analysis of key events, such as the Kings Speech and review of public finances by the Chancellor, and a live Policy Monitor to track Government announcements.
- A live Devolution Monitor to ensure we know how we are progressing against our asks for each portfolio within the North East CA. This is managed through the Devolution Working Group coordinated by the Policy and Insight Team.
- The role of Political Assistants to help influence through political channels, as well as continuing to forge links with our MPs in terms of policy.
- Purchasing a forward-looking communications grid. This was tested over the election period and would give us a detailed planner of key events, announcements and report launches over the next 12 months, helping us to be able to identify speaking, report, event, awards and other opportunities. Such a tool is currently used by many news organisations;

18. While poverty and sustainability are suggested as the major two focus areas for our Influencing Strategy, it will not preclude us pushing key asks in other areas.

19. Recent examples of our influencing activity include;

- An article in LGA First magazine this month from the Leader highlighting the South Tyneside Festival;
- Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) pieces on the cost of living, poverty and the South Tyneside Pledge;
- Congratulations letters to new ministers this month, including the Education, Energy and Environment Secretaries and Deputy Prime Minister;
- See & Solve mentioned in the national Association of Directors of Social Services survey;
- The Leader meeting the new Culture Secretary;
- The borough is also showcasing the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) programme at the Local Government Association's conference in October and the Leader is chairing a session on leisure and health.

- The Lead Member for the Voluntary Sector, Partnerships and Equalities writing to the new Armed Forces Minister outlining our work on the Armed Forces Covenant;
- Strengthen key partnerships with organisations such as Homes England and Highways England.

20. In addition, Lead Members continue to make the case to the new Government of the importance of monies announced for South Tyneside through previous levelling up funds.

Implications

21. By adopting this more targeted approach and focussing on two key themes, we will be able to focus influencing activity in these areas and deliver the change and funding that is needed to reduce poverty and maximise the opportunities for South Tyneside from the sustainability agenda.

Financial and Resources

22. There are limited financial implications from this report, although officers are considering purchasing a forward planner of events, reports, announcements and publications to help target the plan. This is used by many media organisations and provides a forward look of 12 months. The costs associated with this are under £4,000 a year.

Legal and Governance

23. There are no legal or governance implications associated with this proposed approach as communications and influencing will remain a key item on Lead Member Briefings and updates will be provided, and opinions sought, at the relevant scrutiny panels.

Risk

24. There are minimal risks from taking a more targeted approach as the report recognises that other influencing activity will take place, particularly when they are of strategic interest to the Council.

Equality and Diversity and Community

25. There are also limited equality, diversity and community impacts from the proposals; in fact, focussing on reducing poverty will ensure further community engagement through initiatives such as the Poverty Truth Commission.

Environmental and Sustainability

26. By focussing on the sustainability agenda, the proposals are ensuring that environmental and sustainability issues are highlighted regionally and nationally.

Council Ambitions, Policies, Strategies and Plans

27. The Influencing Strategy is at the forefront of the delivery of the South Tyneside Vision as it aims to access the resources and policy change needed to deliver. The proposals to focus upon poverty and sustainability align directly to the ambitions to ensure people are financially secure and to connect them to jobs, particularly in the growing green economy.

Consultation and Engagement

28. Consultation has taken place with officers across the Council and, in those two themes, there are strong partnerships already in place, such as the multi-agency Poverty Group. There was considerable partner input into the two summits that have been held on poverty in the past two years, with a third planned with partners on child poverty this Autumn.

Recommendations

29. **It is recommended that Council agree to the focus of the Influencing Strategy upon the two areas of poverty and sustainability and empower officers to provide key messages on South Tyneside's asks to Lead Members.**

Reasons for Recommendations

30. This proposal is recommended in order to focus member and officer influencing activity on two key areas in order to drive the maximum possible benefits for residents and businesses in South Tyneside.

List of Appendices

None

background papers background papers background papers

Influencing Strategy Update

The following is a list of the background papers (excluding exempt papers) relied upon in the preparation of the above report:

Background Paper	File Ref:	File Location