

Report to:	QSMTM
Report by:	Sarah Hutchison
Meeting Date:	25 April 2018
Subject/ Title: (and VC no)	Communication Strategy Report 2017 - 18
Attached Papers (title and VC no)	None

Purpose of report

1. To report progress against measures of success for the Communication Strategy 2015-20.
2. The workings for this report are saved in VC101252.

Recommendation and actions

3. The QSMTM is asked to note the contents of this report and to agree the proposed revised target for Measure 5.

Progress against measures

Summary

- Measure 1: continued positive progress towards the target.
- Measure 2: continued positive progress, unable to predict whether the target will be achieved.
- Measure 3: significant decline in performance, high likelihood target will not be achieved. Action to address and revised target to be proposed.
- Measure 4: target met, but performance likely to decline significantly following introduction of a new subscription service.
- Measure 5: target is not achievable, revised target proposed.

Measure 1: A minimum of 40% of all applications received annually to be made via the online appeal portal.

4. 26% of all appeals in 2017-18 were made via the portal. This represents satisfactory performance for the first full year of operation and indicates **the target is likely to be achieved**.

Table 1: proportion of appeals made via the online portal, compared to other methods

Received via online portal		Received by Letter/email/fax etc		Total
Number	%	Number	%	TOTAL
134	26%	373	74%	507

Source: *Investigations Performance report to March 2018 (VC100684)*

- The proportion of users is expected to increase over time as awareness of the digital service grows and users become more confident. SMT may wish to note, however, that use of the portal fluctuated over the year and, particularly, that it declined towards the end of the year. This suggests the need to increase efforts to promote the online service and to identify improvements to the user’s experience.

Table 2: proportion of appeals made via the online appeal portal

Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4
26%	30%	28%	26%

Source: *Investigations Performance reports*

- A desired outcome from the portal is a reduction in the proportion of invalid appeals. 29% of all appeals were closed in 2017-18 as invalid, compared with 28% in 2016-17. The following table shows the “validity rate” for appeals made by different methods.

Table 3: validity of appeals by method of application

	Invalid appeals	Valid appeals	Total received	% valid by method
Application form	2	7	9	78%
Email	98	163	261	62%
Fax	1	1	2	50%
In person	0	1	1	100%
Letter	25	48	73	66%
Mean non-portal appeals				53%
Online portal	27	99	126	79%

Note: excludes appeals awaiting validation at the year end

- The above data indicates a stark contrast in validity rates between appeals made through the portal or application form or other methods.
- The high validity rate for the application form may be attributed to the context: the form is provided to applicants in the context of an enquiry to the office (there is an element of individual support). Unlike the application form, the portal is available without contacting us, it checks the data entered and provides real time advice about addressing any issues.
- The 40% target is based on the estimated proportion of appeals that would have to come through the online portal to achieve a significant reduction in invalid appeals. The assumption is that increasing the proportion of online appeals will have a positive impact on the proportion of valid appeals received. Though this was true for appeals made through the portal in 2017-18, it is too early to conclude the extent to which the perceived benefit will be realised in the longer term. It is possible that the portal is more attractive to confident and experienced applicants, who are more likely to submit valid appeals.
- For information only
- Colleagues may be intrigued that there were 27 invalid appeals via the appeal portal. The online portal does not screen out **all** invalid appeals. The checks it performs relate to the

most common reasons for invalidity (not all reasons). The portal also cannot check whether the user has entered accurate information. A user may force the portal to move from one stage to another by entering erroneous information, or the user may not provide sufficient grounds for dissatisfaction in a free text box.

12. The reasons for invalid appeals received through the portal in 2017-18 were:

Table 4: Online portal appeals validation failure reason 2017-18

Validation failure reason	Number of appeals
Application abandoned	4
Application does not specify information request	1
Application out of time	1
Application relates to Commissioner procurator fiscal or Lord Advocate	1
Application withdrawn	3
Body not a Scottish public authority	2
No grounds for dissatisfaction in application	7
No grounds in request for review	3
No request for recorded information	1
No response to review (20 working days not allowed)	1
No request for review made: authority did not reply to request	1
Request does not describe information	1
Request for review out of time	1
Total	27

Measure 2: Continued reduction in failures to respond to 15% of valid applications.

13. 19% of valid appeals in 2017-18 concerned a authority's failure to respond to a request or a request for review within the statutory timescales, a decline against the 20% reported in 2016-17.
14. While this is encouraging, **it is impossible to predict whether the 2020 target will be achieved.**
15. The target is predicated on an assumption: by delivering consistent, informative messages to stakeholders about FOI and good practice, public authorities will be influenced to respond to requests and reviews on time, thus reducing the increasing trajectory of failure to respond appeals from the 25% level reported in 2013-14 to 15%.
16. In 2015, the Commissioner published a Special Report on the issue of failures to respond. We have subsequently featured the issue in annual reports, including naming authorities which were the subject of such appeals. Weekly Decisions Round up emails frequently raise awareness of the issue. The importance of responding on time is a consistent message of the roadshow programme. We have also made a self-assessment toolkit available to authorities to improve their own practice.
17. Failure to respond is not, however, an issue that can be addressed solely through communication activities. Enforcement action is at least as important as positive communications. The Commissioner has also undertaken effective interventions into individual authority practice, including the Scottish Government (about which we received the most failure to respond appeals).
18. The target is also sensitive to changes in the external environment beyond the Commissioner's control.

Measure 3: 20% increase in the number of annual unique website users (from 54,000 to 64,800)

19. The following table is extracted from the Website Statistics Report (VC100954), also on the agenda for this meeting.

Table 5: annual unique website users 2017-18

Annual totals	2016-17	2017-18	% change
Users	54,979	52,839	-4%

20. The number of annual unique website users fell significantly in 2017-18. Growth in the previous year was also below target. **It is therefore highly unlikely the 2020 target will be met.**
21. The Website Statistics Report provides more details about use of the communication medium and some clues to possible causes of the decline in user numbers. While user numbers increased slightly for the Your Rights section (where content was refreshed and promoted), visits to the decisions database dropped considerably. This supports the commitment, in the operational plan 2018-19, to a significant review to increase the website's appeal.
22. The review will identify new measures of success, to be approved by SMT.

Measure 4: 20% increase in the total number of subscribers to content via our website (from 1017 to 1250)

23. At the time of preparing this report (18 April 2018), the current number of registered subscribers to our newsletter had reached 1418, a 15% increase on the 2016-17 (where we reported a 13% increase against 2015-16). **The target has already been exceeded.**
24. The finding is provided with a strong caveat. The current arrangements for subscriptions do not enable us to check how many subscriber accounts are active. Preparations are underway to improve subscription arrangements. It is highly likely that the number of registered users will decline as inactive subscriber accounts will not be reported in future.

Measure 5: Increase in read receipts for Commissioner emails to 75%

25. The Website Statistics Report provides information about the weekly Decisions Round up emails. These are sent through the Activedition platform. This does not provide information about whether users have opened emails. The statistics report observes a decline in the mean number of website views (where users click a link in the mailing) per edition to 209 in 2017-18, compared to 264 in 2016-17.
26. We also issued 8 electronic mailings in the year, through the eMessenger service. The following table provides information about those mailings, including the number of "opens" (read receipts) and clicks within emails to online content.

Table 6: Emails issued to stakeholder lists via EMessenger

Mailing	Date Sent	Recipients	Opens	Clicks within emails
Special Report Proactive Publication	28/04/2017	919	33%	9%
Model Publication Scheme update	31/07/2017	350	48%	19%
International Conference of Information Commissioners	03/08/2017	811	26%	3%
Appeal portal (applicants)	11/08/2017	366	55%	5%
Annual Report and Accounts 2016-17 (hard copy recipients)	28/09/2017	28	28%	4%
Annual Report and Accounts 2016-17 (domestic stakeholders)	28/09/2017	1146	30%	8%
Annual Report and Accounts 2016-17 (international stakeholders)	28/09/2017	192	32%	7%
Model Publication Scheme Monitoring 2018	23/02/2017	705	32%	7%
Mean performance for all mailings in 2017-18			40%	9%

27. The recipient response to mailings varied considerably, for example:
- (i) The mailing about the launch of the new appeal portal generated the most positive recipient behaviour (55% opened the email).
 - (ii) 48% of recipients of the Model Publication Scheme update opened the email, compared to 44% the previous year.
 - (iii) Only 30% of domestic stakeholders opened the annual report email, compared to 46% in 2016-17.
28. The response to all of the above mailings is considerably short of the five year target. **There is a high likelihood the target will not be met.**
29. With the value of hindsight, it is unlikely the target was achievable.
30. Most literature on the use of email software concerns its use for marketing (private sector). “Conversion rates” (the proportion of sent emails that are opened), vary considerably, depending on activity and audience. Benchmarking data¹ reveals that a 35% conversion rate for email marketing is strong performance.
31. There is no literature about the effectiveness of email software for the uses similar to our own and therefore no industry benchmark to assist with target-setting for our purposes (communication in relation to public function and own organisational performance). We do, however, need a target to drive continuous improvement.
32. It is therefore suggested that the target should be derived from the data we have about own performance.

¹ For example, <https://www.smartinsights.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Email-open-and-click-rates-by-sector-2018.png>

33. A more appropriate target, based on performance, is “Increase in read receipts for Commissioner stakeholder group emails to 45%”.

Risk impact

34. The risks associated with communications are well-recognised in several areas of the Strategic and Operational Risk Registers 2017-18.

Equalities impact

35. The Communication Strategy 2015-20 provides that we will ensure our communications are both accessible and appropriate for our stakeholders.

Resources impact

36. The Communication Strategy 2015-20 is delivered within planned operational resources.

Operational/ strategic plan impact

37. The Communication Strategy 2015-20 is delivered via several objectives in operational plans.
38. The new operational plan for 2018-19 includes objectives to promote the online appeal portal and to review the website.

Records management impact (including any key documents actions)

39. None

Consultation and Communication

40. None

Publication

41. I recommend that this committee report is published in full.